

“Blessing Sunday”

Based on Psalm 124

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“Our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” What a great statement of faith. It is a statement of faith that grounds us, comforts us, gives us courage, and hope. This is not the only place where this statement shows up in the scriptures. Just a few psalms before, Psalm 121, we have that beautiful lyric: “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” What a vivid and strong statement of faith.

This faith claim is a statement of power. It declares that God is more powerful than any other entity in existence. Surely, the one who made everything is the source of power itself. And so, in comparison of God’s power and the power of the enemies of God’s people, surely God has more power. For Israel, a relatively small people in a larger world with much larger peoples, such as the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Persians, they saw great nations, with large armies and massive wealth. Then there were the Romans, a whole different level of power and strength. Israel was so small in comparison to these great empires. But it is God who made the heavens and the earth. And Israel belongs to God. So the enemy may be powerful and fierce. But our God is greater in power and strength.

Psalm 124 is a psalm of deliverance. It starts out by saying that if the Lord had not been on their side when their enemies attacked them then Israel would have been utterly destroyed. They would have been swallowed up as if an earthquake cracked open the earth, or engulfed as if a torrential flood swept them all away. God prevented Israel from being chewed up like a lion’s prey. Israel escaped like a bird breaking free from the fowler’s snare. In their time of need, when their enemies, stoked with anger, bore down on Israel to destroy the people, God intervened and delivered them from sure destruction.

We don’t know which enemy the psalm is referring to. Some have suggested that this psalm was written after the great exile, the time when

the Persians invaded and destroyed Jerusalem, and most of Israel were taken in exile to Babylon. But the exile came to an end. Cyrus, the king of Babylon, allowed Israel to return and rebuild Jerusalem. So maybe this psalm is a way to celebrate collectively how God has delivered them from the Persians. But maybe it wasn't the Persians. Maybe it was when the Assyrians threatened to destroy Israel. Or it was the Egyptians. Or it was the Romans. In their history, Israel has been overrun a number of times. But eventually, all these foreign powers lost their hold on Israel. At some point, God delivered them.

So Israel may not have been wiped out like being deluged by a flood, but they did get wet. God did come to their rescue. God was on their side. But that didn't mean that Israel did not suffer. For most of their existence Israel was an oppressed people. They were often under the thumb of some other foreign power. And this psalm picks up on that history. The psalmist says that they escaped from the fowler's snare. The snare was broken and they escaped captivity. But they were captive first. The enemy had caught them, bound them, held them against their will. But the fowler's snare was broken. The power of the foreign enemies was broken. And the psalmist infers that it was God who broke the snare, who broke the chains, that set Israel free from their oppressor. Yes, oppression happens. The oppressor does have its way with the oppressed. But the time will come when God will act, and the oppressor's chain will be broken, and the oppressed will be set free. For God is on the side of the oppressed.

What a relief this psalm must express. In spite of the great suffering of Israel's experience of oppression, they are not destroyed. Over their history, Israel has suffered oppression in ways that most if not all of us here can never understand. We must never forget the Holocaust, the determined attempt to eradicate Jews from the face of the earth. Nevertheless, in spite of all the suffering that Israel has endured over the centuries, Israel still exists. They are not destroyed. God has come to their rescue to prevent their utter destruction. If it wasn't for God's intervention time and again, surely Israel would have been destroyed. Yet, Israel exists. God was on the side of Israel. More broadly, God is on the side of the oppressed.

But I want to take this a step further. This powerful statement of faith, that God is the maker of the heavens and the earth, implies that God cares deeply and loves the heavens and the earth. And if God loves and cares for what God has made, then surely God seeks to protect the heavens and the earth. In other words, God is on the side of the heavens and the earth. So if the heavens and the earth are experiencing oppression, are being attacked, injured, invaded, occupied, in the process of being destroyed...God will intervene because God is on the side of the oppressed.

Do the heavens and the earth have enemies? Are there any peoples that seek to overwhelm and dominate the heavens and the earth? I think perhaps there are. Maybe intentional or maybe out of ignorance, I believe there are people who oppress the heavens and the earth. Now, I said last week that we can't do much to the heavens. We can and do pollute the air. But we have no impact on the sun, moon and stars. We are impacted by these entities, but impacted in ways that help us thrive. Our life depends on the sun. The beauty of the moon gives us comfort. The billions of stars in the universe provoke from us awe and wonder.

But we do impact the earth in dramatic ways. We enrich soil to make it even more fertile. We channel water for the purposes of irrigation and for hydroelectric power. We take sea water and take the salt out so that it can be used for irrigation or for drinking. With time we are able to transform desert places into fertile fields. We can protect animal species, moving them from near extinction to full flourishing again. Someone recently told me that there is a bald eagle nest near Grandview, which is pretty cool, especially because I remember when I was a kid that the bald eagle was very endangered. No longer. I remember when the grey wolf was near extinction. They now run free in Yellowstone. I have hope that one day bison by the hundreds will once again thunder across the plains.

But we also make a lot of roads. We tear up what used to be farm land to build more houses in the suburban sprawl. We pump chemicals into the ground. We spray pesticides that threaten the survivability of bees. We continue the deforestation of the Amazon. Fertilizer run off creates massive algae blooms that kill off the fish. Lead leaches into the

water that then comes out of the water fountains of elementary schools, not only in Flint and in Detroit but in other places as well.

We, as the human species, impact the earth in many ways. Some of the impacts foster life and renewal. Some of the impacts are destructive and deprive the earth of life. Some of our impacts liberate the earth to bring forth life, which is what the earth is designed to do. Some of our impacts oppress the earth, undermining and even preventing the bringing forth of life, frustrating what the earth is designed to do. We know that God, who made the earth, is on the side of the earth. So here's the question: are you also on the side of the earth? Do you stand with God as a faithful steward of the earth or not?

I can't imagine there are any of you who would readily say that you are not on the side of the earth. I am sure we are all concerned about the well-being of the earth. We all know that the earth is our home. It's the only home we have in this life. And not just for us, but also for our children, grandchildren, all the generations that will follow us. This is our home. Surely all of us want to be responsible stewards of the earth, not just because God commanded as much in Genesis 2 but because we want there to be a habitable earth for the generations to follow. For better or worse, previous generations have handed the earth to us to care for. And our care is a mixed bag. Lake Erie is much cleaner than it used to be, back in the days when the water caught fire in Cleveland. Poor farming practices that turned the fertile prairies of Oklahoma and Kansas into barren sand in the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s have been restored through conservation efforts. The harm done to the earth in previous generations can be repaired. We do have the capacity to bless, restore, heal the earth.

The hopeful thing about all of this is the conviction that God will intervene to protect the heavens and the earth from destruction. But the frightening thing is that the human species might be wiped out as a consequence of God's protection of the earth from destruction. Now I know that might sound a bit alarmist. Maybe God would intervene in some way to prevent humanity from being wiped out as a consequence of the destructive impact humanity will make on the earth in the years and centuries ahead. The fact is that whether you see the earth as your

responsibility to tend and care for or as a resource for you to extract for your own purposes, we all suffer from the consequences of our collective failure to care for the earth. We rise and fall together. That's not to say that some suffer more than others. For example, there is a reason why massive pig and chicken farms are located in rural areas and often near the populations of people with brown or black skin. Environmental racism exists. Still, environmental degradation has no borders. We are all affected. And if entire species can become extinct, with or without human causes, then why couldn't the same thing happen to the human species? Maybe God would prevent that from happening. Maybe the long term plan is for humanity to leave the earth and resettle on Mars and from there to the stars. Who knows?

What I do know is that it would be wise for all of us to commit ourselves to be on God's side. If God is on the side of the oppressed, then we should be on the side of the oppressed. If God is on the side of the heavens and the earth, then so should we. This has consequences for how we live, what we eat, what we buy, how we tend our corners of the world. So this is my challenge for us as this series of sermons during the season of creation comes to a close: I challenge us all to do what we can to protect and care for the earth, trusting that God is our help, the one who made heaven and earth.