Sermons at Christ Church

Be One Body In Christ, belonging To Each Other.

Pentecost XVIII
The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

If the Lord had not been on our side, let Israel now say. If the Lord had not been on our side, you may say so. Don't get it twisted, it is because the Lord is on Israel's side. The writer of Psalm 124 makes this bold statement about Israel's' relationship with God-it was a one of a kind relationship in which God was on the side of Israel-liberating them from slavery, defeating their enemies, protecting them, guiding them and directing them as a nation of disciples elected to bring God's light to the nations of the world. This was a relationship where Israel depended and benefitted from God's abundance. But it was never a relationship without trials and tribulations-being in exile was one of those trials.

An example of the benefits Israel enjoyed is captured in the story of Esther where the Jews are in exile. The story has four main characters: King Ahasuerus, Haman, Esther and Mordecai. Esther and Mordecai are both Jews but Esther didn't disclose her identity, whereas Mordecai was well-known as a Jew. In the story, Mordecai is the mentor of the beautiful Esther who becomes Queen under bizarre circumstances. Mordecai has Esther's ears and so when he heard about a palace coup, he told Esther, who also told the king. The king's life was saved and he destroyed his would-be assassins.

Haman, who out of nowhere, rose to power and prominence, demanded obeisance from every Jew including Mordecai. But Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman. This created some sort of an enmity between Haman and Mordecai which escalated to the point where Haman develops hatred for Mordecai and all Jews in Susa, the area which was the setting of the story. Haman then plans to annihilate all the Jews.

Mordecai hears about this plot and becomes so concerned that he tells Queen Esther about Haman's plan to kill all the Jews. King Ahasuerus who had been spending time with Queen Esther implores Esther to make her request, and promises her even half of his kingdom.

Queen Esther drops a bombshell-there's a plot to kill her people, and her only request was that the king spares her life and that of her people. Who is leading this plot? The king asked. Haman was the response. The king became so incensed that he orders Haman to be killed, and so the life of all the Jews is spared.

In thanksgiving, a festival, Purim, is established by Queen Esther and Mordecai with the proclamation that it should be celebrated by Jews to remind them of the time they were saved from their enemies-when enemies like Haman rose up against them. For Queen Esther and Mordecai, the sparing of their lives was made possible because the Lord was on their side. Don't get it twisted, the psalmist says, if the Lord had not been on our side, let Israel now say.

If the Lord had not been on your side and mine, we may also say so. Over the past year and half we have been in some sort of an exile like Esther, Mordecai and the Jews. All of our lives have been upended by the virus. We have endured so much. We have lost so much-loved ones, jobs, our sense of security and community. We cannot even sing when we gather enough courage to come to church. We have to maintain some distance between ourselves and our neighbors. Our world has changed in a way we never anticipated.

Throughout the tragedy of the pandemic, a recurring question has been "From where is our help to come?" There were days when all hope was completely gone. There were days when darkness completely took over our lives. There were days when we felt like the Lord was not on our side, because if He were on our side, we shouldn't be struggling like this, we shouldn't be hurting like this, our world shouldn't be crumbling right before our very eyes. It often felt like God had abandoned us and left us to take care of our own very lives.

I know of some who have grown so disillusioned that they have lost all faith in the God who calls us to be the salt of the earth. Salt is good, but if salt loses its saltiness, what use do you have for it? To them, God is like the salt which had lost its saltiness because in the midst of our challenges, we found no use in the God they have come to know, love and serve.

But if you ask me, the contrary is true, because if the Lord had not been on our side, what would have been our fate? What would we have done? And do we know how we would have handled what may have happened to us?

The fact that God is on our side doesn't preclude us from the violence of our enemies nor does it take away trials and tribulations. The fact that God is on our side doesn't mean that all will be honky dory. The fact that God is on our side doesn't mean that we get to always sing kumba-ya.

In fact, it is precisely because God is on our side that is why we get tested, that is why we are refined by the fire of life's circumstances so that our testimony may ring true like that of Esther and Mordecai, so that we can look back with gratitude and awe, and look into the future with a sense of celebration for what the God who is on our side has done and continues to do for us.

This is my praise, the fact that you and I can see each other, can hear each other, can break bread together, can pray together, can worship together-even if online, can offer ourselves, our gifts of time, treasure and talent is enough testimony that the Lord is on our side, we know where our help comes from and so we don't ever get it twisted.

As a community of faith, we are grateful for the baptism of Wisdom this morning, we are grateful for each other and count on each other, especially at this time where we invite ourselves to prayerfully consider our pledge commitment to each other for the coming year. We make this ask because we believe that the Lord is on our side-for we have been blessed by the Lord's goodness. We make this plea to you because we believe that the Lord is on our side-and that our generous giving is a mark of our gratitude.

More to the point, because we believe that the Lord is on our side, our challenges shouldn't undermine or question our faith in God, rather, they should push us to commit ourselves in prayer to the one who is on our side.

The apostle James invites and encourages the faithful to pray with the assurance that "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." Prayer has the power not just to change our own lives but also the circumstances, events and the lives of others. Prayer does not change the past, but it can change the future course of events in our lives, the lives of our loved ones and even those who seek to prey on us. The fact that we are called to prayer does not mean that the evil which does not die will no longer inflict wounds on us, but that when it does, when it happens, we have the capacity to deal with it, the strength of will to fight it, the backbone to withstand it, the hope and faith to overcome it, because the Lord is on our side, fights for us and never abandons us.

As overbearing as our needs may be for us, it isn't so with the God who is on our side-the God who knows our needs, carries us when we are too weak to walk, too tired to run, too famished to eat, too thirsty to drink, too helpless to comfort ourselves and too powerless to heal our wounds. Don't get it twisted, Lord is on our side.

An interesting fact about the gospel story is that Jesus doesn't buy into the jealous rhetoric of his friends because not only must we be willing to accept those who become God's answered prayer in our lives, what matters is that the purposes of the God who is on our side are being fulfilled.

The question then is, what stands in the way between you and your total devotion to the God who is on your side? I do not know what stands in your way, but this I know, if your hand, foot, eye causes you to stumble, cut it off, Jesus said. Let's rid ourselves of the things in our lives that hold us back from a wholehearted devotion to the God who is on our side, who has never been against us and who has always been for us

If you so believe, as I do, that the Lord is on our side, then let your generous giving to God speak for you, let your unadulterated commitment to God speak for you and let your total devotion to God speak for you. Amen.