

## **DELIVER US FROM EVIL**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Sept. 11, 2016  
Based on Daniel 6:25-27, Psalm 34:17-19, II Timothy 4:17-18***

The sermon this morning is the third in a sermon series entitled, “Navigating the Storm—How to Journey in Faith through Troubling Times.” Today is of course the anniversary of one of the most troubling days that we have seen in recent human history. We were stunned on 9/11 with the sheer evil of the event—the hatefulness, the bloodthirstiness, the utter disregard for innocent people, the dark twisting of religion. Yet this sort of evil has been repeated in terrorist attacks ever since. Such evil proves that the Bible is correct in its assessment of human nature—that human beings are sinners, prone to turn from God, to distort God’s truth, and, in alienation from God, to descend into great wrongdoing.

But terrorism is just one piece of the world’s evil; we confront all kinds evils in the world at large and in our individual lives. All of this gives real urgency to the prayer that we find at the heart of the Lord’s Prayer, where Jesus leads us to pray, “Deliver us from evil.” [Matthew 6:13] What is the Bible talking about when it speaks of God delivering us out of evil? This will be our focus this morning. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

A boat concession manager raised his megaphone and shouted, “Boat number 99, your time is up. Please return to the dock.” The boat did not move. The manager shouted again, “Boat number 99. Your time is up. Come back in immediately or we will have to charge you extra.” Still the boat did not move. The manager was about to shout out again, when an assistant came up and said, “Sir, we only have 75 boats. There is no boat number 99.” The manager yelled out, “Boat number 66, are you having some trouble out there?”

We can have trouble even in the entertaining areas of life. The troubles get far bigger when we look at the world at large. One of the feelings that people often have when they look at the world’s troubles is that God, if God is good, should somehow prevent such troubles from happening. Indeed the number one argument of atheists is that there cannot be a God, because there is so much trouble in the world; if there were a God, they say, then God would keep such trouble from happening.

The flaw in this thinking is quickly revealed when we consider the actions of terrorists. The terrorist activity of recent years has reminded us that the worst evils are those that are perpetrated by human beings. So should God prevent terrorists from acting? God could make them drop dead on their way to their evil deed, or least break their toe—that would slow them down. A bit of reflection leads us to realize that if God intervened to stop human beings from doing what they intended to do, God could indeed eliminate human evil, and God at the same time would eliminate human freedom; for if we were prevented from doing anything wrong, we would be mere puppets, controlled by a divine puppeteer. Our actions and our “decisions” would be meaningless.

This issue is addressed in the opening pages of the Bible in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The story proclaims that God created human beings with true freedom—Adam and Eve are free to choose whether to obey God or not—for it is only in freedom that human beings can genuinely love God and be authentically good and live lives of real meaning. But this entails the risk that people will act wrongly, which Adam and

Eve do as they disobey God. It is a story that repeats itself throughout human history, and we see it in glaring fashion today. The Bible goes on to proclaim that God answers human evil; but if we are to remain free, God's answer must be something other than preventing us from wrongdoing.

The same sort of dynamic is at work when we consider those troubles that arise when human beings collide with the hard edges of the world—those pains that occur when people collide with floodwaters, or with earthquakes, or with the hard edge of the stairway of the deck on the house, as I did when breaking my toe this past week. When I was in the emergency room a few days ago getting my toe examined, feeling like a clumsy oaf, I was sitting at one point right next to a kid who had also broken his toe. That made me feel better. Even an agile, athletic young kid had also broken a toe—except then I found out that rather than tripping up the stairs, like I had done, he had broken his toe while doing high jumps on a trampoline. A little more honorable. So the question arises: should God have prevented that kid from breaking his toe? Well, obviously, the break could have been prevented by preventing the kid from getting on the trampoline in the first place. In the same way, God could prevent a lot of troubles by taking us out of this world and putting us in an environment where we were just surrounded by cushy, soft surfaces. I would rather be in an environment where I can break my toe. A world that contains genuine challenges has risks, but it is only in such a world that life has excitement and meaning and opportunities for real personal growth.

So if God is going to answer the troubles of the world, that answer must be something other than preventing any trouble from happening. It is significant that the Bible never talks about God preventing trouble. It speaks occasionally about God protecting us when we are surrounded by trouble. Most of all, the Bible speaks of God delivering us out of trouble.

This theme of deliverance is one of the major themes of the Bible. We heard it in our Scriptures this morning. In the stories of Daniel, Daniel was not spared from trouble. He ended up in the lions' den. But God delivered him out of trouble, so that the king at the end of the story proclaimed, "God delivers and rescues . . . for He has saved Daniel from the power of the lions." [Daniel 6:27] In the life of Paul, Paul experienced all sorts of hardships and trials; he spoke figuratively of being "in the mouth of the lion," but he testified to God's deliverance as he said, "The Lord stood by me and gave me strength . . . so I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will deliver me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom." [II Timothy 4:17-18] Psalm 34 sums up well the Biblical theme of deliverance when it says, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers them from them all." [Psalm 34:18]

So God in love places us in a world in which we have genuine freedom and encounter genuine challenges, which necessarily means that people will sometimes make wrong choices, and people will get hurt. Trouble is an inevitable component of a world in which we are truly free agents. But God does not leave us in trouble. God acts with deliverance, to provide a way for us out of trouble.

If you think about it, this whole idea that we experience trouble but might find deliverance out of trouble is the central component in many of the stories that we tell in books and in movies. Whether it's Stars Wars characters battling the dark side of the Force, or the characters in the Ice Age series meeting challenges in their environment, or

the multiple superhero movies in which the characters confront some cosmic threat, the recurring narrative is that the hero of the story is beset with great trouble, but with courage and resolve the hero slugs away against evil and finally emerges triumphant. The Biblical story line is . . . somewhat different. People encounter great trouble, they press forward with courage and resolve, and then they come up against the Red Sea, or the armies of Babylon, or a cross. The Bible is more realistic than our popular fantasies; because the Bible recognizes our flaws, our limitations, and our mortality. The Bible is clear that we cannot finally save ourselves; we need a deliverer. Moreover, the Bible is clear that real deliverance must bring more than an answer to our immediate troubles. Have you noticed how movies have endless sequels?—because there is always a new round of troubles. Somehow we need an answer to the root of our trouble.

The good news of the Bible is that God acts with deliverance. The story of the Bible is the continuous story of God acting to bring people out of bondage, to open the way through the sea, to lead people through enormous challenges, and finally to bring us through death itself. God is a God of deliverance, and that deliverance comes to its supreme climax in Jesus Christ. Moreover, the deliverance that Christ brings is precisely the sort of deliverance that we need.

If there is anything that was made clear on 9/11, it is that our central human problem is inside of us; the problem is sin—the turning of the human heart away from God to embrace false values and to engage in all sorts of wrongs. This means that one who is to deliver humanity must do far more than take care of external troubles. Deliverance must bring a transformation of the human heart; and this is exactly what Christ does. Christ brings forgiveness and a renewal of our spirit, putting us in a right relationship with God, enabling us finally to live rightly. In sending us Christ, God preserves human freedom—as people can still choose for or against Christ—while at the same time God provides the real and profound deliverance that we need. The key then for us is to turn to Christ in faith, to pray to the Lord saying, “Deliver us from evil,” so that His deliverance can take hold in us.

Troubles will continue in this world, since people continue to have the freedom to act wrongly and to stumble against the hard edges of the earth. But in Christ we can know that the troubles are passing; because we can look now to Christ to bring us beyond our failures, to lead us through trouble, and to bring us finally even through death. In Christ we are no longer in bondage to trouble; to the contrary, we can become part of Christ’s answer to trouble as we share in ministry with Christ, and join in how God is at work with deliverance in the whole world today. So we can unite with the spirit of the apostle Paul, committing ourselves to Christ; and we can say with confidence, “The Lord will deliver me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom.” (II Timothy 4:18)