



“God Is For Us”

Lent II, February 28, 2020

Fr. Albert Scharbach

“If God is for us, then who shall be against us?” (Romans 8:32)

That's a rallying cry. Of course it's true—God will prevail! I get a vision of God's Church, on your behalf, rolling over the enemy like a football team. Go Big Red!

But that's not our experience each day. Others *are* against you. And at times they causes trauma—real lasting damage and loss. How can we dismiss those who are against us when the adversary appears to be getting the upper hand?

That's one question that this passage demands of us. And there is one more.

That is, “who is the *us*?” Think of the American Civil War. *Both* sides believed “God is for us.”

Let's answer this first question first—*who* is God *for*. And that will lay the groundwork for how we can claim his victory for all times.

Let me start by saying that I admired Lincoln's words in light of the Civil War: “Ask not if God's on our side but whether we're on his.” So in other words: choose God and submit to him first! That's good, but it can actually be more man-centered than God-centered. The scriptures say “We love God because he first loved us.” So what makes “us” become his is rooted in God's love first.

So we become those who God is for by simply *receiving* Jesus, who loved us first. And so we read, "*He who did not spare his own Son but offered him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?*"

Not apart from him, but *with* him.

And if we are walking with Jesus, then we will experience his way of life. That means following him through the cross in order to get to the resurrection.

So the "us" refers to those who are willing to be fully conformed into the image of his son. We see this in a verse that immediately precedes today's reading:

For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Rom 8:29)

So "God is for us," and that means he is for those who bear the family likeness of Christ. These are the ones who can claim the final verse:

Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us?

Once again: "If God is for us, who shall be against us?" Only through the cross and resurrection can we say this consistently, as we are conformed to the image of his Son. The cross sounds like a deterrent. But in a fallen world, crosses come, whether you choose them or not. But the promise is this: through the cross and resurrection we can *always* claim the victory, and the victory is more than you can imagine.

Let's consider some examples from our other readings today and from life.

The sacrifice of Isaac

Paul's wording of the Greek in our Epistle—God “offered him up”—referring to Christ, exactly matches the Greek words of the Septuagint in Genesis 22, referring to Abraham's offering of Isaac.

This is also called the “sacrifice of Abraham,” but calling it the “sacrifice of Isaac” is a double entendre. It refers to what Abraham is sacrificing, but also Isaac's *self*-offering. “The offering of Isaac.”

In the 2nd century, St. Hippolytus, said Isaac cooperated in this sacrifice, and that's been a Catholic teaching. That's why Abraham could bind Isaac without a struggle, by the way. They were both willing to give all, trusting in God first.

The Transfiguration

Likewise, while Paul says God “offered up” Jesus, it's also true that Jesus offered up *himself*.

The Gospel reading of the Transfiguration shows this. Mark tells us that Jesus was talking to Moses and Elijah. Luke's Gospel indicates what they were talking about “his departure,” which refers to the cross. That is the shining moment where the voice came: “*this is my beloved son. Listen to him.*” The words we must hear are not just that Jesus would be glorified, but that the cross would come first.

So let's step back and ask, what brought about the circumstances of this sacrifice? *The work of God's enemies.* So once again, “*If God is for us, then who shall be against us?*” The answer, apparently, is that if you follow Christ, then *lots* of people will be against you! But since that's part of the plan, don't be dismayed. The triumph is that God will use even these attacks for his good.

No one can ultimately thwart God's purposes on behalf of the one whom he is for—that is, the one who is willing to be conformed to the image of Christ.

Writing in the 4th century, St. John Chrysostom said,

Yet those that be against us, so far are they from thwarting us at all, that even without their will they become to us the causes of crowns, and procurers of countless blessings, in that God's wisdom turneth their plots unto our salvation and glory. See how really no one is against us!

Since the beginning

This is the pattern from the beginning. The Fall of man proves how the serpent was against humanity. But what do we pray at the Easter Vigil? “*O Felix culpa!*” “O happy fault!” Because of this adversity and fall, we have Jesus, who raises us higher than we were even in Adam.

The ancient foe hasn't stopped warring against humanity, even as continues to stir people up against you and all of God's people. God will turn this to good.

You see, there has to be a death if you are to get the Resurrection. And that death often comes by way of your enemies.

Joseph and his brothers

Consider Joseph in the Old Testament. He was sold into slavery by his own brothers, who turned against him. Imagine the trauma! But God eventually used this so Joseph's dreams could come true. Many years later he could tell his brothers, “What you intended for evil, God intended for good!”

That's the case for *all* the evil that we face.

That being said, a reasonable question could arise, as it did for my wife this week: Abraham, got his son back. What about the times you *don't* get your son back? Likewise, Joseph got his dreams fulfilled. Or you might ask, "What about when, unlike Joseph, my hopes and dreams die unfulfilled?"

The answer: you have something *more*. Abraham's got is son back for several decades on earth. That was a mere shadow of what we have in Christ, which is *eternal*.

Our son, Isaac

Let's consider my son, Isaac. We lost him on an earthly level in August, but the eternal blessings are already *palpable*. I wish I had time to share more about that. Answered prayers, changed lives—I could go on for hours. Let me assure you: the veil between heaven and earth is very thin.

On balance, we're not *always* thinking about victory connected to our son's death. Nor will you be in the midst of your own losses—even small ones. But the Resurrection remains the foundation of our faith. And we know our son lives. And your hopes and dreams, which occasionally seem to die (but usually on a much smaller scale)—they lead to holiness if you understand those losses in light of the cross and resurrection.

To help you believe this more deeply, I need to make one more observation: God often *foretells* his plans to help us believe that his love is *in* our crosses, and that they are part of his plan to bring us to the Resurrection.

For example, did you know that the sacrifice of Abraham took place on the same mountain on which our Lord was crucified? That's right—Mount Moriah, the mountain Abraham climbed with Isaac—the Scriptures later tell us that Mount Moriah is where Solomon built the first temple in Jerusalem. On a hill of this same mountain that our Lord Jesus Christ died. This sacrifice of the cross was the victory plan from the beginning.

Likewise, we have been blessed to see similar providences in the loss of our own Son, showing God's plan and gracious hand. I've mentioned the loss of our son Isaac a few times since the funeral, not to draw attention to myself and my situation, but in order to provide a timely example that applies to all of us. In this case, I can't ignore the parallels that many of you would also notice, because we've shared this experience together as a parish. But I highlight those parallels for a moment, you'll see they give encouragement for the way God orders the crosses in your life—even much smaller ones—which great care.

Most of you know that Isaac was buried at the feast of Transfiguration. We had a deep sense that it was supposed to be on *that day*, even though I was initially reluctant to choose a feast day for a funeral. Who would have known that the Transfiguration would be paired with the sacrifice of Isaac today?

Then, some of you know that in December we just happened to come across a photo after Isaac's ring Mass for high school. We chose as a nice backdrop a chapel in the church where the Mass took place. But what did a closer look reveal? Behind me, it said "Take thy only son Isaac, whom thou loves, and offer him up as a holocaust." Behind Isaac, it said "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."—words Jesus heard from the Transfiguration mountain. Two readings from today juxtaposed.

And like Isaac cooperated in his sacrifice, anticipating Jesus, we see that our Isaac did the same. He didn't *choose* for a semi-blind man to run him over. But journals prove that Isaac was ready to go and be with the Lord at any moment. Three years ago, he wrote in his journal, "As

Abraham withheld not his only son from God, help me to withhold nothing.” He prepared his heart ahead of time so that he would be willing to give his life if that brought greater purposes to bear.

What’s more, this passage from Romans was our reading the week before Isaac died. This was the very passage that I studied and preached on the week before, and as a result it’s the passage that prepared us as a congregation to receive and better understand our Isaac’s death. The message was clear: Nothing can thwart God’s redemptive purposes—*all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose. If God is for us, who can be against us?!*

And so, what is the message in this for you? You may not always see circumstances foretold and align quite so clearly as this in your lifetime, but they are just as well-ordered for you by God. God has foreordained that you will be conformed to the image of his Son, and so he has just as intimately prepared the crosses in your life that will bring you to a greater resurrection. And when you’re earthly life is over, God will show you how all worked together toward the beauty of redemption.

Before I conclude, I’d like to offer this final assurance, from the words of the well-known author Fr. Jacques Philippe. He didn’t lose a son, but he trust in God’s love in all the crosses of his life. He wrote:

Many of the circumstances that I consider damaging could, in fact, be for me, if I had more faith, precious opportunities to love more: to be more patient, more humble, more gentle, and to abandon myself more into the hands of God. Let us then be convinced of this and it will be a source of immense strength: God may occasionally allow me to suffer [tremendous adversity], but He will never leave me in want of himself, of his assistance and his mercy or of anything he would allow me

to grow unceasingly ever closer to him, to love him more intensely, to better love my neighbor and to achieve holiness.

This is the promise of the sacrifice of Isaac and the vision of Jesus at the Transfiguration. Your sacrifice is your mountaintop. When you encounter circumstance and people against you—know God is for you even more. In light of this, we do indeed have a rallying cry that knows no end: “If God is for us, who can be against us!”