

Re-centering words for anxious times

Eine Predigt von Jon Isaak zu Römer 9-11; insbesondere Kap. 11,11-16. 29-36

{In these anxious times, where there is anxiety on so many levels, a re-reading of Romans 9-11 can help to re-center our perspectives with their reminders that—despite appearances to the contrary—God’s word has not failed, we are not alone, and God can be trusted to bring the ancient shalom project to completion.}

Good morning! Mary Anne and I have really enjoyed getting to know you these last few weeks. We especially are happy to see where Rianna and Benni are ministering and the people they are serving. Thank you for welcoming them so warmly. It is good for parents to see their children in action. We are pleased.

It is also good to have this opportunity to share a sermon with you this morning. Hopefully, it will be a word of mutual encouragement.

I have chosen a biblical text—the one you just heard read—that may seem strange at first, but I believe it can prove to be encouraging in anxious times. Let me set it up, and then you can see if it works.

The text I have chosen comes from Paul’s letter to the Romans. It is a letter that has functioned for a long time as a key document for Christian communities. And that is at it should be. It is at the head of the Pauline collection of useful texts for Christian communities.

Paul is mostly concerned in this letter to demonstrate how God is indeed faithful to the covenant promises to Israel, even now as the Pauline mission team campaigns to include non-Jews within the covenant people of God. Their vision for a renewed Israel—one with observant Jews and Gentile Christians in one mixed community—comes to a highpoint in chapters 9-11, the chapters we are considering today. The Pauline team took this vision to the synagogues on Saturday and to the house churches on Sunday, promoting the benefits of mixed Jesus communities as they traveled around the Mediterranean world.

What happened to that vision? Well, several decades after Paul’s death, it began to fall apart. By the end of the first century, Christians were composing anti-Semitic writings and Jewish synagogues were introducing new lines to their liturgical prayers that effectively outed any Jews believing Jesus to be the Messiah, calling them cursed. It was a classic case of “push-and-pull.” By the second century, the Christian church was largely a non-Jewish movement. The renewal that Paul had championed had the unintended consequence of creating two separate religions, Judaism and Christianity.

Another consequence was that Christians began to read Romans 9-11 less and less; it would only be consulted if someone wanted to know the history of why it seemed that God had rejected the Jews in favour of Christians. But for most, these three chapters became “skippable” (like those annoying ads at the front of video you want to view). Romans 9-11 was relegated to an excursus, an appendix, a digression. And so, Romans was transformed from a vision statement for a mixed community into an explanation of personal or individualized salvation—especially in the Reformation period of church history.

This morning, I want to try something—an experiment. I want to make the case that **in these anxious times, where there is anxiety on so many levels, a re-reading of Romans 9-11 can help to re-center our perspectives with their reminders that—despite appearances to the contrary—God’s word has not failed, we are not alone, and God can be trusted to bring the ancient shalom project to completion.**

Today, Mennonite churches around the globe are not arguing about including Jews and non-Jews in a mixed community; but there are differences about other things that divide us—vaccine passports, carbon economy, immigration, nationalism, and so on. Some Mennonites think of themselves as “progressive,” while others prefer “traditional” views on issues like gay rights, rights of indigenous peoples, and the climate catastrophe. I do not know much about German Mennonite churches, but certainly in Canada we are struggling with the challenges of worshipping together with those who have differing opinions. We are living in anxious times. There are strongly held opinions, opinions that do not easily co-exist. In view of these diverse opinions, I suggest that we recycle Paul’s appeal for a mixed Jew-Gentile Jesus community and read it as an appeal for a mixed global Mennonite communion, one where traditionalists and progressives can still worship together.

We have only heard a part of these three chapters read this morning, but it is enough to give you a sense of the Pauline group’s innovative theological thinking. The chapters review some 30 Old Testament texts. Re-reading the texts of their tradition from the vantage point of their present experience, Paul’s team hears again a word of instruction, guidance, and inspiration from the Lord. This is good theological practice in any generation.

Lots was at stake for Paul and his mission team—they wondered why the Jews had not embraced the gospel message of the launch of the Messianic age? Is God not powerful enough to redeem the very people known as God’s? Has God rejected God’s own people Israel? If so, can God be trusted with non-Jews? With anyone? What if God decides to reject them, too? Maybe God is after all just like all the rest of the gods of antiquity ...

Like people of faith have done for millennia, Paul shows that God's word has not failed, that God is faithful to promises, that God can be trusted to carry out the ancient covenant. After a song, we will look at four specific affirmations.

I am suggesting that we read these three chapters from the perspective of our own divide, not Jew-Gentile, but Traditional-Progressive, or whatever polarity you are facing. Is there some encouragement here for working at a vision for a mixed community? I think there is! Consider these four affirmations coming from these chapters:

1. God’s calling/leading, rather than birth/ethnicity, determines belonging when it comes to God’s community/family (Rom 9:8). {Read verse 8} God’s calling extends to all. This is God’s default position. God’s economy is not based on a scarcity framework, where there is only so much, and we must fight for our share. Rather it is based on abundance, which of course needs to be embraced to be activated. Still, God’s abundance framework ought to shape our conflicted conversations—conversations on climate, immigration, racism, sexism, and so on. There is enough for all.

2. God is in the habit of shaking things up and surprising so-called “insiders” by exposing their arrogance, pride, ethnocentrism, and abusive ways (Rom 9:17-18). {read verses 17 and 18} Paul makes a bold move here. He associates Israel with Israel’s opponents—three in particular: Esau, Pharaoh, and vessels of wrath! How strange is that? Apparently, not that

strange! This is all for God's good purposes; it is not meanspirited or treasonous. It is about softening the cold heart of "insider" presumption with the "what if" question people of faith regularly ought to ask: "What if this—you fill in the blank—is how God is accomplishing the ancient promises?" This should give the church pause, too, and shape our conversations on power, prestige, and privilege. Campaigns like #MeToo and #ChurchToo call out the church's mistreatment of minorities and the less powerful. Our name may be Pharaoh, too, for a time. So, watch and learn.

3. God is not anxious or worried; God is patiently working for "the long game" (Rom 11:25). {read verse 25} Paul reassures his readers that his gospel does not claim that God has switched allegiances, switched teams, crossed over to the other side. God has not given up on Judaism in favour of Christianity. Christ is the goal of Torah, Temple, and Israel's ancient mandate. God does not lose anyone or anything. So, for us, while we see the profiles changing for family, faith, and church, they can still be rooted in God's righteousness and covenantal promise. However unimaginable it may be at the human level, Paul argues that God is big enough to hold two irreconcilable communities together. And, in the end, even if we cannot make a mixed community work for us, Paul is convinced that God can do it at the cosmic level, at the end of time. So, relax.

4. And so, when things do not make sense, people of faith still gather for prayer, worship, and song in allegiance to God (Rom 11:33). {read verse 33} Paul chases away fears of uncertainty by changing keys, going from argumentation to poetry, song, and praise. This is classic. While the path from here to creation's completion remains uncertain, the goal is certain. With Paul, we are invited to pray again the doxology. It is all we can do when things do not add up. We carry on. We continue to do what we can with what we have, trusting God to make something of it for the larger purpose of humanity and all of creation.

As I finish, someone will surely say, "I thought you said Paul's vision for a mixed faith community of Jews and Gentiles did not work out?" Yes, that is true. And perhaps a mixed Mennonite community with traditionalists and progressives might also not work out. But then there will always be some other divisive polarity to work at. The vision for a mixed community will be reborn in a different way with different issues. Apparently, God is not anxious. God's collaborative vision remains. And so, God's vision ultimately does succeed.

I find this encouraging, and hopefully you do, too.
Thanks be to God.

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31. Oktober 2021