

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, September 19, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"STANDING IN THE GAP"

Ezekiel 22:30

A few days ago in the early evening there was a minor car accident on Thomas Street, just this side of the tracks. There were no apparent injuries, just bent doors and bumpers. No ambulances could be seen, only two tow trucks. They always arrive first, don't they? As a result of the accident the east bound lanes coming toward Queen Street were blocked and traffic backed up. And before police arrived, a brave young man parked his car, got out and acted as a traffic cop, stopping traffic in one direction for a time so cars could move through, then stopping it in the other direction to allow cars to go the other way. He was standing in the gap.

The title "Standing In the Gap" comes from Ezekiel chapter 22, verse 30. The chapter is not a positive one. God's words to Israel through Ezekiel are a lament over the nations' sin. The people, says God, are doing violence to my law, profaning my Name and the Sabbath, shedding innocent blood, practising extortion and oppressing the poor. And the leaders especially had gone wrong, kings and government officials and priests. Even the prophets were condemned for they had whitewashed these evil actions, seeing false visions and telling the people, "Thus says the Lord," when the Lord had not spoken. God said, "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land, so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none." (Ezekiel 22:30)

Now earlier in Israel's history, Moses had stood in the gap between God and Israel, and prayed that God would not destroy or cast off his rebellious people. So the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people. Psalm 106 reads, "The people forgot God their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea, therefore he said he would destroy them, had not Moses his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them."

But by the time of the prophets, Israel had now been living in the promised land and in Jerusalem for many years, but once more they were turning from God. Once again God's judgement drew near. If only God could find someone who would stand before him on behalf of the land and call the nation to repentance. If only there was someone who would speak to God on behalf of the people and speak to the people on behalf of God. If only there was someone who would stand in the gap. Now the prophet named Jeremiah tried, but the people had rejected him. And when God looked for another to stand in the gap before him, sadly, he found no one. So judgement came upon Israel. The walls of Jerusalem were destroyed. The people were taken as captives into Babylon. Thankfully that was not the end. God's mercy triumphed over his wrath.

After 70 years the people returned home. Israel was restored and Jerusalem rebuilt. God made a new covenant with his people. And God raised up those who would forever stand before him in the gap. Never again would God look and find no one.

First of all, Jesus stands in the gap for us.

Paul tells us that "There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave his life as a ransom for all..." (1 Timothy 2:5,6) God gave Jesus, his divine Son, his only Son, to become human and to stand in the gap between God and humankind. With one hand Jesus touches God and with the other he touches us. And by his life, death and resurrection he brings God and us together.

Now we may be uneasy with the concept of God's wrath, which both Testaments speak of. God is love, is he not? Yes, but the wrath of God is not God's anger towards us in a personal way. In fact, the wrath of God comes out of his love for us. The wrath of God means that God is adamantly and finally opposed to all that harms us, and all the sin and evil which leads to physical and spiritual death. God's wrath is his way saying "No" to all that would separate us from him in this age and the age to come. And that big "No" was not poured out on us, but on his beloved Son as he died. That's why the Cross was so horrible for Jesus. It wasn't just physical pain; it was spiritual agony beyond comprehension. The mediator took our place and bore our sins and their deadly consequences. Then the Father raised Jesus from the grave, opening the way for all who trust in him to have a new relationship with God now and for eternity. God did all that because he loves you and me and the whole world so much. As you think of the fellow standing between the two lines of traffic, think of Jesus standing in the gap, holding back the consequences of sin and evil and death, so that fallen creatures like us can have access to God and His Kingdom.

Notice that the mediator's work is universal. Paul tells us, "God our Saviour desires "all" to be saved... there is one God; there is also one mediator Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all." Some people say, "It seems unfair that only believers in Jesus are saved. What about people of other faiths or who've never had a chance to hear?" But what if in love God sends his Son to everyone at some point? What if Jesus quietly and graciously draws near to every one seeking to come in and do his saving work? That doesn't mean everyone will receive him, but could it be that God somehow gives everyone a chance? Now normally Jesus draws near to people in worship, in the word read and proclaimed and in the Lord's Supper. So we preach the gospel to the ends of the earth, and at every opportunity which is presented to us. But Jesus is the Sovereign Lord who comes on the wings of the Holy Spirit. He can draw near to people in any way he chooses. In lands where preaching the Gospel is forbidden there are reports of Jesus appearing to people in dreams. So what I'm suggesting is not beyond the realm of possibility. Jesus finds a way. Would a loving God do any less? The Bible tells us that Jesus is the one mediator between God and humankind, standing in the gap on our behalf, in order to bring God and all people together now and forever.

Here's a second application of "Standing in the Gap." **The church stands in the gap between God and the secular world.**

In a world which eagerly turns from God and goes its own way, the church stands as an enduring witness to the reality of God and his righteousness. Just the existence of a church building in a community can speak to people of the God who made them, loves them, and cares for them. Honestly, where do people turn in a time of personal or national crisis? Yes, to the church. The church is far from perfect, but it's here that people come to find God's grace and peace and comfort and direction.

On church signs it's common to have short and snappy phrases. I'm really not too good at those. I would not be a good advertising person. In any case, I always like to put up on our sign a truth about God. For isn't that really the church's role - to be a witness to the reality of God and Jesus Christ? The goal of secular society is to wipe out any public reference to God. But the church stands in the gap, bringing people into the presence of God, and bringing the truth of God to the world, building up God's righteousness, calling people back to God.

A struggling church in a changing Toronto community was sold to make way for a condo development. After the church was torn down people noticed its outline on the building beside it. For decades the church had shaded that building from the sun and left a mark. Some people saw that as a parable for the very real witness of the church in the community over the years. The church's influence is hard to measure but it's very real. Let me tell you, the church is very necessary to you and me as believers and to the wider community. Never think we could just do away with it or do without it. The church stands in the gap between God and the secular world.

Finally, we stand in the gap for others.

Paul writes, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all in high positions..." (1 Timothy 2:1,2) The prayers we offer to God for others are called intercessory prayers. We can pray for family and friends, fellow church members, leaders at all levels. And when we pray for someone, we really are standing in the gap before God for them. Every day I pray for my own family and for our church members, especially those in need. And I appreciate your prayers on my behalf. I pray for the wider church. When I think of it, I pray for our national and local leaders. Even if you don't like a particular leader, pray for them anyway. You pray not so they will do your will, but God's will.

Now when we stand in the gap for one another, we're not telling God something he doesn't already know. But perhaps even God needs our help in the world where there is so much push back against God, so much resistance and disobedience. And somehow praying for others from a loving and concerned heart opens up a channel through which God's grace and power flows into a situation. We can't explain it. But we know and see that praying for others really makes a difference. That's why we have prayer chains

which you can access with just a phone call or an email to the church office.

You may notice the flyers posted around the church advertising "Prayer in the Village" meetings. This initiative is spearheaded by Pastor Jim Craig from Portico Church. Last spring some of us received an email from Jim. He wrote "Many of you know that the small building just south of Trinity Anglican on Queen Street was turned into a community police station a few years back. I was surprised to notice one day that it had closed! Curious I drove down to 11 Division on Dundas at Erin Mills. I asked the officer at the desk if he knew why our Streetsville Community Police station had been closed. He said that it was a question of making the best possible use of their limited resources. The officers on duty in our village had nothing to do! There was so little crime and other issues to deal with that they couldn't justify keeping the station open." Jim concluded, "In 2006 a few of us began to meet together to pray for Streetsville on a regular basis. We prayed for peace and security, for safety, for healing and prosperity in the realms of family, church, government, business, education, media and the arts. Is there a correlation between these two events? I don't have a scientific study to prove it. But I do have the testimony of 2,000 years of church history, that when God's people pray, things happen."

God said, "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the gap before me on behalf of the land..." God has indeed raised up those who stand before him in the gap.. He has give us His Son Jesus, who is the mediator between God and humankind. God has raised up the church to stand between God and the secular world and to build up God's righteousness. God has raised up people like you and me to lift people up to him by intercessory prayer. And when God looks and when he listens, may he find us faithful in the task.