

Message for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (8/22/2021)
Ephesians 6:10-20

I tend to be suspicious of militant expressions of Christian faith, even those that are well loved. The so-called Lutheran fight song, “A Mighty Fortress is our God,” is a prime example. It’s one of Martin Luther’s best known works, and finds its way into the liturgy at least once a year on Reformation Sunday. The hymn’s biblical source material is Psalm 46, which speaks a powerful word of hope and peace: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble... behold the one who makes war to cease in all the world; who breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, and burns the shields with fire.”¹ **According to the psalmist, when God engages with warriors, it’s to bring an end to warfare.**

But, that perspective is easily lost in the language of a hymn like “A Mighty Fortress.” Images of “sword and shield,” the “satanic foe,” and God “fighting at our side” can quickly slide from metaphor for spiritual struggle into justification for actual violence against those we deem to be evil. **Luther was certainly not shy about identifying the enemies of God in the 16th century, and we’re liable to fall into a similar trap when we start drawing battle lines according to our own notions of the will of God.**

But, spiritual warfare is distinct from actual warfare. That truth is made plain in our second reading from Ephesians today, another famous example of militant Christian language: “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his

¹ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* translation.

power,” the author encourages first-century followers of Jesus. “Take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.” But, the struggle to which this passage refers is expressly nonviolent: “Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,” the writer insists. That is to say, individual human beings are not the intended target, but rather “the rulers,” “authorities,” and “spiritual forces of evil,” or to quote the more familiar King James translation, “the principalities,” “powers,” and “spiritual wickedness in high places.” Of course, evil implicates real people; that’s why we begin our worship each week with a confession of sin. But, the writer of Ephesians is more concerned with the power structures through which evil operates than with the individuals who are caught up in those structures.

Ironically, militarism is itself one such structure. Large-scale violence has been a near constant throughout human history, but the immediate context for the writer of Ephesians is the Roman conquest of the known world. Like many so-called “great” civilizations, **Rome consolidated its power through systematic slaughter, enslavement, exploitation, and intimidation. Crucifixion is a glaring example of the ways Rome not only brutally punished but also terrorized subjugated peoples who dared to challenge its supremacy.**²

² See Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 27-30.

That's the backdrop for the "armor of God" discourse at the end of Ephesians. **It's an extended analogy of a Roman soldier's equipment³ in which each instrument of war is given a peacemaking parallel.** The disciple's "belt" is truth, by which the author means the truth of the gospel, God's word of hope embodied in Jesus, who was crucified by Rome yet raised by God to new life. The "breastplate" is righteousness or justice, that is, right relations with God and between God's creatures, the kind of relations that promote thriving for individuals and communities alike. The proper footwear is any shoe that allows the disciple to deliver not a violent blow, but a word of peace. The "shield" is faith, or trust in the abiding love of God, which is a gift of grace and "not the result of works, so that no one may boast."⁴ The "helmet" is salvation, or belonging among the people of God whom God embraces in mercy for all eternity. And finally, the "sword" is the word of God, the core message of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the promise that God is at work to overcome the power of evil once and for all.

"Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.... Take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm." It's fitting that the Apostle Paul, whom tradition credits with the Letter to the Ephesians, delivers this rousing speech from the confines of a prison cell.⁵ The field general is himself a captive of Rome,

³ Peter Rhea Jones, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 375.

⁴ Ephesians 2:8-9.

⁵ Richard Carlson, www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-21-2/commentary-on-ephesians-610-20-6.

underscoring that this is no summons to kill in the name of God, but rather an appeal to remain steadfast in faith in spite of hardship and fear. **Those whom the author of Ephesians calls to “take up the whole armor of God” are the same ones Jesus has called to “take up their cross” and follow him.**⁶

Notwithstanding the church’s misuse of military imagery over the centuries to justify colonization, exploitation, and even genocide,⁷ **the “whole armor of God” is no armor at all. The struggle against evil is no armed conflict. And, the champion is no conqueror, but God’s own Beloved, who refuses to deal violently with a violent world, but instead reaches out to us with sacrificial love.**

In light of this insight, I wonder if the “armor of God” analogy might be illuminated by a contemporary parallel. If it isn’t literally armor, then what kind of apparel in this day and age might reflect the spirit of Paul’s encouragement? Whose clothing might match the tone of his appeal? By way of conclusion today, allow me to suggest one possibility:

*Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.
Put on the whole attire of God’s healing work in the world.
Stand therefore, and tie the drawstring of your scrubs.
As shoes for your feet put on whatever will support your efforts to care for your patients.
Take the contact gown and tie it in the back.
Take the N95 mask and fit it securely around your nose and mouth.
Take the face shield.
Take the gloves, and fit them over the cuffs of your gown.
Take up the whole attire of God’s healing work in the world, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.*

⁶ Mark 8:34.

⁷ members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2021-8-22/2222#resources.