

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Rooted and Grounded in Love: Who is the Enemy?”
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August 2, 2015

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18; Ephesians 6:10-20

There are certain pages I sometimes wish I could tear out of the Bible. The Leviticus holy code with its extensive list of offenses deserving capital punishment. The story of Jesus calling a Canaanite woman a dog. The part of first Corinthians where Paul commands women to keep silent in churches. But of all the problematic texts in scripture, this one might actually top the list.

Christians over the centuries have spilled blood, fought wars, and done violence in the world by “putting on the whole armor of God and standing against the wiles of the devil.” In the 3rd century, as the church gained political power in the Roman Empire and needed to unify its leadership, the devil took the form of heretics and dissenters. Muslims, Jews, and even Byzantine Christians personified the devil during the Crusades. The devil of the Reformation was anyone who disagreed with the civil leadership’s theological allegiances.

Today, it seems the devil is everywhere. The liberal media. Muslim extremists. Christian extremists. The greedy 1%. The welfare freeloaders. Helicopter parents. Free range parents. It seems like every aspect of our lives creates a divide, establishes an enemy, puts a face on the devil. We are a society plagued by judgement and hatred and fear. Our armor is thick and our swords are sharp.

But we are not putting on the whole armor of God for this battle. Instead of the belt of truth, we wear the belt of opinion. The breastplate of self-righteousness guards our hearts. Our shoes make us ready to proclaim judgement and provoke conflict rather than the gospel of peace. Our shield is information rather than faith, whether the information we have is accurate or not. The helmet of salvation is replaced by the helmet of a sense of security, no matter how false it may actually be. Our sword is words, perhaps, but not the word of God.

Just wars, holy wars, and ideological wars are easier, it would seem, than spiritual warfare. We’d rather fight monsters, give evil a name and a face, than fight the evil that lies within every human heart. Wouldn’t it be easier if greed had talons and our vices had teeth? If a sword or a gun or a nuclear bomb could destroy our malice, our indifference, our bigotry, our vanity?

But the spiritual warfare described in our reading today is like fighting smoke. It permeates everything, we breathe it in, it stings our eyes and burns our throats. We are practically choking on evil and yet, we’d still prefer to arm ourselves and lock our doors to physical threats, real and perceived, than struggle against “the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness.”

When I was a teenager, I read a series of novels by Christian fantasy writer Frank Peretti. The novels depicted contemporary society motivated by angels and demons locked in a cosmic battle for worldly power. I remember scenes of a New Age religion leader with a demon perched on his head, its talon

stirring his mind like a cup of hot cocoa. Sin marked a person with a black hole on the chest that grew larger and larger until it killed them. Demonic dragons swallowed people up in one gulp.

This was my understanding of spiritual warfare – cosmic creatures and spiritual forces in an epic battle with humans serving as unwitting pawns. While my beliefs have changed on this matter over the years, this vision of how evil works in the world is not so far removed from how Christians of the first century understood things. Greco-Roman philosophy imagined a kind of ontological continuum stretching from the underworld to the heavens. In between heaven and earth, semi-divine beings struggled to move up toward the immortal and immaterial. New Christian converts, influenced by this philosophy, believed these beings to be locked in a spiritual battle for dominion over the earth.

But in the Christian understanding of spiritual warfare, humans are anything but unwitting pawns. The whole letter to the Ephesians describes the kind of transformed life we are to have in Christ, a life “rooted and grounded in love.” This grounding in love allowed the church to be raised up into the heavenly places of that ontological continuum, growing spiritually into a dwelling place for Christ.

Now, it would be foolish to ascribe to a Greco-Roman view of the cosmos in the 21st century, but the spiritual warfare described in this letter is nonetheless very real, and the consequences for each of us and for the church are no less vital. There is no doubt that the darkness is still very present. To deny evil and its power in the world would be ludicrous.

What is more challenging is to accept that the evil is both within us and around us. The battle front is within our hearts and in the heart of every human being. As the apostle Paul said in his letter to the Romans, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Families, societies, governments, institutions – even the institution of the church - all are subject to the “spiritual forces of evil.” We don’t need to look to a mythical underworld or imagine the exploits of spiritual beings to see that we participate in systems of oppression and are complicit in the suffering of others.

This foe cannot be defeated with special ops or advanced tactical weapons. Guns and bombs and tanks and aircraft often serve to strengthen the rulers, authorities, and powers of evil. Fighting flesh and blood distracts us from fighting the true enemy.

However, God has armed us, both defensively and offensively, for the true battle we are called to fight.

A belt of truth that will help us withstand the lies we are told and the lies we tell ourselves. Lies about what we deserve, lies about who we are, lies about groups of people, lies about what we are capable of.

The breastplate of righteousness to protect our hearts from being divided. In the bible, a righteous person is described as someone with an undivided heart, someone with a singular devotion to God and God’s purposes. This breastplate protects us from “chasing after wind,” as it says in Ecclesiastes, giving fragments of our heart to every selfish desire.

We are advised to put on our feet whatever will make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. I love that this one is so open-ended. It speaks to the complexity of peace. One might need justice to be ready to

proclaim peace, and someone else might need humility. Peace requires preparation, and that preparation can look different for different people and situations.

I love this next image: a shield of faith “with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” There are times we must use our faith as a shield. There are times when the darkness and sin and evil in this world does feel like flaming arrows flying at us. We can dodge depression and addiction, meaninglessness and loneliness, apathy and greed for a while, but at some point, they hit us like a flaming arrow through the heart. Faith, meaning a deep and perhaps inexplicable trust, in God, can act as a shield. The arrows won’t stop flying at us. We will still feel their impact. But we can be shielded from them enough to keep fighting.

The helmet of salvation assures us that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. God’s saving work protects the most vulnerable and most important part of us. Every hair on our head is under God’s salvation.

”And the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

I’ve asked people around here, and apparently not many of you did “sword drills” as children – maybe it is a Southern thing. But a sword drill is when the Sunday school teacher calls out a chapter and verse, and the children race to see who can look it up the fastest in their Bible.

The Bible most certainly has been used chapter and verse as a sword, used to cut down those who believe differently, interpret differently. Used to conquer and destroy. But this is not how it was meant to be used.

When the letter to the Ephesians was written, there was no Christian bible. The canon of texts, including this one, had not yet been established, and no one was going around quoting chapter and verse, because there were no chapters or verses.

The word of God here could be referring to God’s words in the Old Testament, the Law and the prophets. But since one of the main themes of this letter is the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile, we can assume that a large percentage of this church was not Jewish and therefore not deeply familiar with those text. Scholars believe that there was a connection between this church and the community of believers responsible for writing the gospel of John, so it’s also plausible that this is a reference to the first chapter of John, which describes Christ as the word of God made flesh and dwelling among us.

However you interpret the word of God, it is clear that the Holy Spirit is the force of power behind the sword. The Spirit goes by many names in scripture, including Advocate, Comforter, and Counselor. The Spirit is not often associated with condemnation, judgement, or punishment. This is a sword used to advocate for the defenseless, comfort the oppressed, and counsel the lost.

The “armor” of God won’t necessarily protect us physically from pain and harm, and it won’t necessarily fend off our physical enemies. No battle is safe. Following Christ isn’t safe, as first century Christians knew full well. They were despised, oppressed, punished, and even martyred for their faith.

But they fought the darkness. The darkness within – their own envy and selfishness, their fear and anger – and the darkness in the world – hopelessness and injustice, corruption and oppression. In this fight, they did not win power or land or money or any of the spoils of war.

But they did win. They built the church. They learned how to love one another as Christ loved them. They created a spiritual legacy that has lasted over two thousand years and has spread literally all over the world.

I don't tear pages out of the Bible. Not because I think it would be a sacrilege, though maybe it would. Struggling with scripture, especially those parts of it that make us angry, or hurt, or doubtful, struggling with those texts deepens our faith, strengthens our Christian identity, and restores our hope that God is good, and loving, and just, and merciful and powerful, and ultimately worthy of our worship. Struggling with this text should convince us that we want to be on God's side in our spiritual battles instead of claiming that God is on our side in worldly conflicts.

So let us be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Let us put on the whole armor of God and stand firm. Relying on God's power, let us stand against the darkness of our own lives, and strive against the powers and authorities that would destroy others. Because the truth is, the war has been won. In Jesus Christ, God has defeated evil and its power in the world. Daily battles continue to be fought, but the outcome is certain. Praise be to God. Amen.