

Well, let's see... Armor, struggle against enemies, forces of evil... Anybody feel like you've wandered into a Defense Department briefing? So far this morning, we've talked about our shield, marched into Zion, lived in tents on the field of conquest, sung a battle song. Maybe this IS a DoD briefing – or a football game.

Jan Egeland, the UN's Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator estimates that fully one-third of the casualties to date in the current conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon have been children; an estimate of more dead children than armed men in the field. The prestigious British medical journal, *The Lancet*, estimates that coalition bombing in Iraq and "a climate of violence" may have led to over 100,000 civilian casualties in that country since the U.S.-led invasion. These estimates, of course, may be high, but in an era where armed conflict has such horrifying consequences, it can be a little difficult to get excited about military metaphors about God and the Church. Of course, such metaphors are deeply ingrained in our scripture, our hymnody and our practice. Part of Israel's earliest understanding of God is summed up in the name Yahweh Sabaoth, Yahweh of the Hosts or Armies. Isaiah, who spoke of a Messiah who would be called Prince of Peace, also wrote of God's armor, as did the writer of the Wisdom of Solomon. It's a small step from talking about Christ's victory over evil to Constantine's legendary vision of *Christus Victor*, which inspired him to carry an emblem of the cross into battle believing that "in this sign (he would) conquer." It hasn't been all that long since every Christian hymnal contained many songs like "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," which is in our hymnal, and "Onward Christian Soldiers, which isn't. Even a seemingly innocuous hymn like "We Gather Together to Ask the Lord's Blessing" used to contain lyrics like "we now do extol thee, our leader in battle." And, of course, there is an entire Christian denomination named for an Army, complete with Captains, Majors and the rest.

The problem is that so much real rather than metaphorical blood has been shed in recent days in the name of religion. It's easy to point to this as an Islamic problem, but Christians have been guilty of the same over two millennia of Christendom. Most of us here this morning remember the bloody "Troubles" in Ireland and sects of Christians are still slaughtering each other or Muslims in countries such as Nigeria and the Philippines. Australian theologian William Loader reminds us of the dangers of language about the Church Militant: "At worst it inspires zealous militarism which has as its goal the defeat of the evil empires. Killing is bad enough, but if people can kill in the name of their God, somehow the whole achievement can be seen as something good and worthwhile. The image doubtless inspires some in our own age to the confidence that they act for God in seeking to rid the world of its enemies, usually defined as those who call their lifestyle into question. By association the desire to define people as friends or enemies sets up barriers of discrimination and hate across the whole world. So the imagery is quite dangerous and can easily get way out of hand in the minds both of ordinary people and of "Christian" leaders."

Well, if we were able to find some lessons appropriate for our 21st Century Seattle sensibilities in last week's lesson from Ephesians, maybe we can find some way to rehabilitate these militant verses. They are the culmination of the letter; save for a few words of personal appeal and greeting they are Paul's last words to the Ephesians. If we see this passage in its context as a closing of this letter about the saving power of God and the breaking down of barriers between

human beings, then Paul's deeper message begins to emerge from we might see as the smoke screen of battle and brimstone.

Paul wraps up his letter to the Ephesians as he began it, with a reminder of God's power. In 1:19 & 20, we find: "(God's) incomparably great power (is) for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms." From the very start of this epistle, Paul has reminded his readers that God's power is the power of life and of love, a power for healing rather than for destruction. Now he begins this seemingly martial passage with a call to the Ephesians to be strong in that very power of love. You may remember in chapter 3 how Paul prays for Christians to "have power (through the Spirit), together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ."

In exhorting his readers to tap into the loving power of God, Paul turns, as he does so often, to a metaphor of clothing. In Galatians, he writes that baptized believers have clothed themselves with Christ. He advises the Colossians to "put on love" and to "put on the new self," a phrase which he repeats in the fourth chapter of Ephesians. Indeed, Paul has previously written to the Romans that they should "put on the armor of light." It is a common way for the apostle to talk about how we should live into the virtues embodied in our Savior. Paul enumerates some of those virtues for the Ephesians in a few verses.

But first, he reminds them why they might need this metaphorical armor – "to stand against the wiles of the devil." For some modern Christians, this phrase may be as big or a bigger problem than the military terminology. I'm not going to argue for or against the existence of evil personified in a supernatural being this morning because regardless of how you might believe on this particular question, the real meat of Paul's point comes in the next verse. "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Evil exists in our world, whether you care to explain it as the work of Satan and his demonic minions or as the impersonal force of chaos and destruction. The Scottish pastor, Colin Williamson, in his comments on this passage calls evil, "that which is contrary to God's will and to which he has said "No!" at the cross." William Loader writes of the rulers, authorities and powers named by Paul, "their role... is the counter-role to Christ. These are the forces that divide, that create barriers, that discriminate, that set people against each other. We fail to appreciate the radical nature of these assertions if we reduce Ephesians here simply to worry about evil spirits and dark forces in the spirit world, unrelated related to every day life... We might speak of dynamics of power, systems at work through vested interests and political powers, destructive forces at work in humanity without needing to embrace a demonology." Anywhere that violence and despair dominate, where personal gain is put before the common good, where men and women seek to subject each other rather than being subject to each other, we feel the cold hand of the powers of evil.

It is critical to remember, as we take our stand against those powers, that as Paul wrote, "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh." We are called to love our neighbor as ourselves, to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Anytime that we try to reduce the problems in our world to the elimination of one man, one woman, one political party, one

class, one faith, one race, then we have fallen into the trap of following the powers rather than following Christ. We are called instead to stand in our armor and to push against the powers of “this present darkness” however they are manifest. Loader writes, “Ephesians is thus issuing a call for people to abandon a Christian naiveté that fails to recognise the potent forces that bring destruction and division in our world. For some in our age that will mean facing up to the fact that Christians have been far too easily sucked into the power games of destructive forces - in politics and economics.” In his song, “Lovers in a Dangerous Time,” the Canadian songwriter and Christian, Bruce Cockburn, uses a phrase that was later adopted by U2: “nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight -- Got to kick at the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight.”

We are in a struggle with powerful forces in our world and it is a dangerous struggle, despite the fact that the eventual outcome is known, for God through Christ has defeated death and chaos at the cross and the empty tomb. Jim Wallis writes that when the South African government canceled a political rally against apartheid, Desmond Tutu led a worship service in St. George’s Cathedral. “The walls were lined with soldiers and riot police carrying guns and bayonets, ready to close it down. Bishop Tutu began to speak of the evils of the apartheid system -- how the rulers and authorities that propped it up were doomed to fall. He pointed a finger at the police who were there to record his words: “You may be powerful -- very powerful -- but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost.” Then, in a moment of unbearable tension, the bishop seemed to soften. Coming out from behind the pulpit, he flashed that radiant Tutu smile and began to bounce up and down with glee. “Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side.” The crowd roared, the police melted away and the people began to dance.”

Those soldiers and police had body armor and weapons. Paul says we have assets that are far greater, gifts from God. There have been a multitude of interpretations of these virtues over the centuries and I’ll just touch on a few of them this morning. William Loader points out “how the armour is in a sense disarming of the destructive dynamics which threaten humanity. Truth is one of the first casualties of hate.” Simply telling the truth is one defense against the evil that threatens to seep into our lives. Other commentators point out that Jesus said, “I am the truth.” To wear the belt of truth is to borrow the character of Jesus, just as having the breastplate of righteousness may be understood as being protected from ultimate destruction by Christ’s own righteousness, which has been credited to our account. As Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians, “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” And Paul may simply be reminding his readers with the breastplate image that right behavior, which he has just spent most of three chapters discussing, is the appropriate response to God’s saving grace. Like the reminder to love God with all of our heart, soul and strength, the reminder of righteousness is to be bound on the breast, close to the heart.

Roman soldiers wore protective footwear, unlike the simple sandals of civilians. Part of our protection against the powers of darkness is our readiness to proclaim the good news that God has declared peace with all Creation. A soft word, after all, turns away wrath, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light, is the softest, most welcome word of all. Andrew Lincoln concludes his comments on this passage with these words, “As the Church continues to be the reconciled and reconciling community, the gospel conquers the alienating

hostile powers and brings about God's saving purposes." Peace on earth, in other words, thanks to God's good favor.

The shield of faith has many connotations. Certainly it refers to our individual faith in Christ; certainly it refers to the ethical quality of faithfulness in our dealings with all people and a willingness to trust others. There is another, less obvious meaning, too. The Greek word used here for shield refers specifically to the long rectangular shields carried by the Roman soldier. They were made of wood and had leather covers that could be soaked in water before battle in order to extinguish the frightful flaming arrows, which were that time's anti-personnel cluster bombs. The shields could also be locked together as the soldiers gathered in the formation known as "the tortoise." In this close formation, the Romans could simply march headlong into the enemy's infantry, the blows of the opponents' swords and spears glancing harmlessly away. When the enemy forces were worn out and in retreat, the Romans were still standing, much as Paul calls on us to be. Those of you who know the history of football may know of the "flying wedge" formation, which used a similar concept to such resounding success that it was finally outlawed as unstoppable. It is a vivid reminder that there is strength in the unity of the Church, in the one Lord, one faith, one baptism that Paul preached in chapter 4 of Ephesians.

Our helmet, Paul writes, is salvation. Our salvation is our crown; the greatest gift of God protects our souls from death as the helmet protects the head. Even today, head injuries in accident or battle are the most likely to kill. Finally, Paul calls on us to take up the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. Unlike the other armaments, the sword is generally considered an offensive rather than a defensive weapon. William Loader remarks that "it is not an instrument of hate, but represents the active element of the image. Christians are called not just to endure and resist, but also to engage in challenging the structures of injustice, the barriers that divide by the word of the good news, which is about love and hope." Coming back to his idea of wearing the belt of truth meaning to be encircled by Christ himself, Colin Williamson reminds us that the Word of God is not just the Gospel but is also the $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\sigma$, Christ, who is not only our final defender but also the abiding one who empowers us for any struggle we face in life.

Paul's last word in this passage on spiritual warfare is prayer. Robert Linthicum of Partners in Urban Transformation writes, "Only by bathing their entire war against "principalities and powers" in prayer does the church have any hope of winning against such a formidable foe. But to be effective as prayer-warriors, that prayer must be constant. It must be intense. And it must be unselfish." Once again, Paul brings his message to the Ephesians around to Christ's example of service to others. In this letter, Paul calls on Christians to love each other, to be subject to one another, and to pray for one another. With that strong theme in mind, it is much easier to remember that Paul does not list the pieces of the armor of God to prepare us for Jihad but to prepare us to be, in the words of the song by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, "Soldiers of Peace."

I really do love singing all those stirring old hymns like the ones we've sung so far this morning. I hope that this consideration of the deeper meaning of Paul's martial language in Ephesians will help all of us to reclaim some of those old hymns and other songs that use similar imagery. As William Loader suggests, perhaps we can allow "the Christ agenda (to) control the imagery, rather than the imagery controlling the Christian agenda." It's not in our hymnal, so we're not likely to sing "Onward Christian Soldiers" on a regular basis. Still, it would be a shame to discard such glorious music from the great Arthur Sullivan, composer of The Mikado, Pirates of

Penzance, and so many other delightful light operas. Perhaps some Sunday we'll at least be able to enjoy Sabine Baring-Gould's third verse: "Like a mighty army moves the church of God; brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod. We are not divided, all one body we, one in hope and doctrine, one in charity." At the very least, I hope that you will be able to sing anew our final hymn this morning, a well-known treatment of these verses from Ephesians. "Stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross," may not sound very PC, but we must always remember that we are enrolled in God's continuing act of Creation, a push against the forces of darkness, chaos and destruction that will sometimes seem like a war. And we can remember, with joy, that God was, is and shall be victorious, that the self-giving love of our redeemer will conquer all, and that Christ shall be Lord indeed.