

Fourteenth Week After Pentecost (RCL/B): "Going Forth Fully Armed to Wage Peace"
Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69
August 24-25, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

What kind of battles have you found yourself fighting this past week? The answers can be kinda personal, so here are some "for instances":

- A battle with a credit card company about a bill that's wrong.
- A battle with an insurance company around preauthorization of a procedure or payment for a new medication.
- A battle with a teenager over curfew.
- A battle at work to get the person who's slacking to pull his or her weight.
- The battle of the "bulge," á la Weight Watchers or Noom.
- A battle to get into recovery or stay there.
- A battle to get more exercise or watch less TV.

Our lesson from Ephesians this weekend is about girding ourselves for battle, preparing ourselves to wage: not war, but peace. The literal pieces of armor mentioned are those of a 1st century Roman soldier. In Hebrew Scripture Yahweh is described as also wearing this kind of armor to protect the children of Israel and to smite their enemies.

Ephesians' description of the armor of God took my mind to museum displays I've seen of knights' armor, made of metal, many separate pieces covering the fighting man literally from head to toe. The suit of armor was so intricate the knight couldn't dress himself. He needed at least one squire to get him into it. It was so heavy that often a system of pulleys was needed to lift up the knight and deposit him on his horse – who may also have been wearing armor!

The connection between a knight needing a squire's help and the armor of God is that God has to provide the spiritual armor for us. We're dressed in the armor of God through **prayer**. So let's look at some of the particulars.

- The **belt** of truth derives from a soldier's "girdle," a leather or cloth binder that the soldier wore to support and protect his middle. It also served as a utility belt from

which he could hang smaller weapons. The belt of **truth** which we are to wear is to encircle our being, protecting us from being deceived and from deceiving others.

- The “**shield** of faith, with which [we] will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (Eph. 6:16) is quite the image, isn’t it? Many 1st century shields were full-length and door-shaped, like some of the ones we see SWAT teams using on TV or in the movies. But the old-time ones were made of wood covered in canvas. They could be soaked in water to repel and extinguish enemy arrows that had been coated with pitch and set ablaze before they were sent flying. **Faith**, our **trust** in God’s promises and in God’s faithfulness, our **trust** in God’s power to save, our **trust** in God’s holy plan for our lives, can extinguish all the “incoming” dangers that threaten to set our life ablaze and burn our hope to the ground.
- The **breastplate** of righteousness builds on the literal breastplate that soldiers wore to protect vital organs like the heart and lungs. To be righteous is to live according to God’s laws, the shorthand for which is to love God above all else and our neighbors as ourselves. The author Frederick Buechner wrote this about the breastplate of **righteousness**:

.... righteousness in the last analysis is love – not love as an emotion necessarily but love as an act of the will: love as the act of willing another’s good even though we may despise the darkness in him just as we will our own good even though we despise the darkness in ourselves.¹

The armor of God isn’t all about our self-protection, playing defense. **Wearing the breastplate of righteousness looks like our going to bat, going to battle, “waging peace” for the last, the lost and the least.** We need courage to do that. This whole passage about our need for the armor of God counters any delusion that the world at large is going to be happy about God’s agenda for the coming of God’s kingdom.

The only **offensive** weapon in Ephesians’ array of God’s armor is the sword: “...*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*” (Eph. 6:17b-c) We might imagine the “sword “ of God’s Word as our defense against attack by those who vociferously disagree with us, and sometimes it **does** serve that role. But sometimes the word of God is a two-edged sword that breaches our **own** defenses and pierces the receptive soul with God’s holy expectations, of which we often fall short:

- Jesus tells the rich young man, “*If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*” (Matt. 19:21)

- In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...”* (Matt. 5:43-45a)
- Through the prophet Micah (6:8), God commands: *“Do justice; love mercy; walk humbly with your God.”*
- In the letter to the Hebrews we read, *“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels unawares.”* (Hebrews 13:1)
- The 1st letter of John says, *“Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”* 1 John also asks the question: *“How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”* (1 John 4:20 and 3:17-18)
- Through Moses, God commands, *“Don’t abuse or take advantage of strangers [aliens]; you, remember, were once strangers in Egypt.”* (Exodus 22:21, *The Message*)

To live like that takes holy courage, so when I read, *“As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace”* (Eph. 6:15), part of the mysterious “whatever will make me ready” has to be courage! It’s also recognition of the **humanity**, the God-given worth of **everyone**, including those on the other side of issues that are near and dear to my heart. We watch the news and are tempted to think of some **people** as evil, because of the destruction they wreak. But all human beings are children of God. They may be swayed by evil, may pursue what we consider to be evil purposes, but the bottom line is that they also are made in the image of God.

Putting on the armor of God makes us both **vulnerable** and **powerful**. It’s a paradox like God’s word to St. Paul: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in your weakness.”* (2 Corinthians 12:9) Through heartfelt prayer and dwelling in the Word, let’s put on the full armor of God today and every day, and go forth to wage peace. Amen

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (NY: Seabury, 1966), p. 42.

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