

Proper 16, Year B
August 22 2021
St. David's and a Sermon for Every Sunday

It was certainly not unreasonable for the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians to invite the reader to put on some armor. After all, by the time this letter was composed the Christian community was on the radar screen of anxious authorities, and Paul, to whom the letter is historically attributed, had been arrested, beaten, snake bit, ship wrecked and left for dead so many times everyone, including Paul, was surprised he was even still alive. Add to that the tenuous unity of the multi-cultural church in Ephesus and-well-surely the anxiety and uncertainty must have been palpable. So, after spending 5 chapters inviting the church to unity within itself our author turns the attention of the readers to the real danger they were facing.

It says, "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." The conflicts the Hebrew people and the Gentiles have with one another pale in comparison to the real conflict at hand- none other than the devil himself.

So, "armor up", our writer suggests. Stand up, put on your belt, your breast plate, and your shoes. Take up your helmet, your shield and your sword. Always be prepared for the impending battle.

This speech had to feel familiar. Its hearers could surely feel their hearts beating faster as they listened, perhaps they stood up a little straighter, their muscles tensed, their

hands curling into tight fists. This speech sounds like every call to arms anyone has ever made. There is a compelling call to unity, a clear identification of the enemy, an urgent description of what is at stake, and finally a call to prepare for battle. We can almost hear the clash of steel upon steel and the roar of combat.

But wait. There is no steel in this call to arms. There is no roar of combat. Read a bit closer and we see that while the writer is using very familiar and adrenaline inspiring language, the content is wildly different. Look at the armor the author invites the reader to put on.

Belt. Breast plate. Shoes. Helmet. Shield. Sword. One would assume- in their day- leather, wood and steel. But that's not what it says. Instead it says truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, the Spirit, Prayer, and whatever makes you ready to proclaim the Gospel of peace. This is very odd armor indeed. Apparently, the tradition tools of combat are of no use in the conflict at hand. In fact, they seem to be the anti-thesis of the armor the writer describes. The armor of the world, with its weight, it's obsession with self and its innate violence is the wrong armor in the spiritual conflict that faced the faith community. Instead the writer calls the hearer to put on truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, prayer and connection to the Spirit.

I wonder how they felt about what the writer was imploring them to do? I mean, how many of them felt they were in possess of these rarified tools for combat? How connected were they to the truth? How righteous were they? How strong was their faith, their assurance of salvation? How vibrant was their life of prayer and their

connection to the Spirit? And how on earth does this even work? I wonder if many of them would have preferred to reach for the more traditional weapons of combat- sword, shield, helmet, belt and shoes? I wonder if the reader then was so comfortable in the armor of the world that they thought the writer was in fact inviting them to put on the wrong armor.

I wonder how they felt about it because it is so easy to wonder the same about myself, and people of faith in the modern world. When I think about all the conflict surrounding us in this world- global conflicts, our national conflicts, racial conflicts, parish conflicts and interpersonal conflicts I marvel at two things. First, how we assume our conflict is entirely horizontal, battling it out with people of different opinions, and also how quickly we put down the armor of faith and pick up the armor of the world. I am amazed at how quickly we turn to distrust, hatred, bullying, blaming, manipulation and our second amendment rights than we are with kindness, love, forgiveness, gentleness and hope. And when, in the heat of our conflicts, we hear the Biblical call to put on the armor of faith we dismissing it as metaphor or hyperbole. Any literal invitation to reject the armor of the world and put on the armor of faith and we are actually offended.

But that's not new, is it? Those who were following Jesus were certainly offended when Jesus offered his version of the armor of faith. In the Gospel lesson assigned for today Jesus said, "those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever

eats me will live because of me.” He says this at the height of the conflict around him, when others were closing in to kill him. Instead of a call to wood, leather and steel, he offers flesh and blood. I suppose the people he was talking to were so caught up in the conflicts of the world around them and so committed to the earthly understanding of armor that they couldn’t fathom this strange notion of armoring up with a bit of bread and a sip of wine. John tells us they were offended, and many left. Those closest to him, however, while utterly perplexed, stayed with him, for they knew what he said rang true. It wasn’t easy, and it won’t be until after the resurrection that they will completely shed the armor of the world and put on the armor of light, but they realized they had been wearing the wrong armor all along, so they stayed.

This is reminiscent of the story in 1 Samuel where the young shepherd boy David is preparing to go to battle against the Philistine giant Goliath. King Saul, who was large and strong, tries to outfit David with his own armor, trusting that it would protect him for his formidable foe. However, as David put it on he felt himself weighed down by it. He could feel it impeding his movement and his ability to pick up what he actually needed for the conflict at hand. He knew that the armor itself would lead to his defeat. So he shed the armor and picked up five smooth stones to encounter Goliath.

Today’s lessons invite us to consider whether or not we have on the wrong armor.

The tools that the New Testament implores believers to embrace are strange indeed.

In the face of “all the Spiritual forces that rebel against God” we arm people with a

bit of bread and a small sip of wine, that is, somehow for us, the Body and Blood of Jesus himself. It calls us to consider that perhaps we have been wearing the armor of the world for so long that we don't even realize that it is the very thing that makes it impossible for us to put on the armor of faith. The armor of distrust, hatred and violence that hangs all over us and fills our hands makes it impossible to pick up the armor of truth, righteousness, prayer and the Spirit. In short, it is impossible to proclaim the love of Christ with a sword in your hand. Today's lesson invites us to put down the armor of the world and put on the armor of light.

How on earth does this work? How on earth do truth, faith, righteousness, prayer and the like stand a chance in the face of the violent powers and principalities assaulting the world? How on earth does a bit of bread and sip of wine prepare us for cosmic combat? How do we know it will work?

Actually, I don't know. But what I do know is that the traditional weapons of conflict never really work. Oh, they are quite effective at instilling fear and wreaking havoc on the world, leaving a trail of suffering and death in their wake, but they do not work to bring about peace, love, reconciliation and concord. One need only look around to see their impact.

Since we know this, then, what is there to lose by putting down the ill-fitting armor of this world? What is there to lose by considering the invitation of the letter to the Ephesians, and accepting the invitation of Jesus himself?

“Therefore, 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. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

Take this bread, it is my body. Drink this wine. It is my blood.

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