



**“Putting on the Armor of God”**

**Scripture – Ephesians 6:10-20**

**Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, July 28, 2024**

In the Hebrew scriptures, we discover passages that form much of the foundation of the Christian faith. Genesis opens with beautiful poetry that affirms that our universe is not an accident. There is a Supreme Being who creates the world and human beings in God’s image. In the Book of Exodus, we learn that the Creator is also a Liberator who opposes people being held in bondage, and a Law Giver who provides fundamental rules for a stable society. In Leviticus, we read that we are to love our neighbor. The prophets call on us to care for people in need and to seek justice for all. The Book of Job informs us that life is not always fair; bad things can happen to good people. The psalms help us to understand that God is like a good shepherd who is with us even in the darkest valleys. Isaiah holds out a vision of the world God wants us to inherit – a world where people beat swords into plowshares and nations live together in peace. In these sacred writings compiled hundreds of years before the time of Jesus, we discover compelling wisdom and words to live by.

However, what tightens my stomach is that the Hebrew scriptures also praise violence and glorify war. It is not enough that the Hebrew people escape from bondage in Egypt, they celebrate the fact that the Egyptians who pursue them are drowned. Are not these also children of God? The walls of Jericho come tumbling down and the people who live there are slaughtered. According to Deuteronomy, God commands the Hebrew people to commit genocide on the Canaanites and the other nations living in the so-called Promised Land. Psalm 137 declares the joy of revenge against the Babylonians: “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”

The barbarity is appalling. Such passages disgust rather than inspire. They prompt us to recoil rather than revel. It is impossible to reconcile such stories with a God of justice and mercy. Thus, we must be careful in how we apply today’s Scripture reading.

New Testament scholars debate who wrote the Letter to the Ephesians. Some believe it was written by the Apostle Paul while he was in prison near the end of his life – around the year 59. Others suggest it was written by a disciple of Paul a few years later. Regardless, the letter was delivered to the small band of Christians living in Ephesus who were being harassed and persecuted. We know that Paul lived in Ephesus for a time, as did Mary, the mother of Jesus, and John may have written his gospel there.

In the first century, Ephesus was a major hub of commerce and culture. A city of the Roman Empire, one ancient historian stated that it was second only to Rome in size and importance. This made it a strategic location for Paul's missionary endeavors. In June, Camilla and I took two of our grandsons to see the impressive ruins of Ephesus that include a theatre capable of seating 24,000 people and the second or third largest library in the ancient world.

Paul did not mince words in his letter to the followers of Jesus living in this prominent city. He stated that being faithful demands tremendous strength and courage and standing firm against one's enemies.

He wrote, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power; put on the whole armor of God." In our day, that military metaphor can sound chilling because of the times in the past when the Church used such language to justify killing. As one scholar noted, "the rhetoric of spiritual warfare against the dark forces of evil became literal warfare."<sup>1</sup> People who disagreed with the official teaching of the church were branded as heretics and burned at the stake. During the Crusades, soldiers marching under the banner of Christ slaughtered Jews and Muslims, claiming that they were defeating the forces of evil. When Christians from Europe colonized new territory, indigenous people who would not convert were killed in the name of Christ. We have good reason to be wary of mixing military metaphors with religion.

In writing to the Ephesians, Paul used a metaphor that his listeners would quickly grasp. They had witnessed the intimidating Roman troops stomping through the marble streets of Ephesus with swords in hand and wearing shiny armor reflecting the blinding rays of the sun. But Paul was flipping the script. Followers of Caesar wore battle armor to incite fear, to kill, and to oppress people. Paul rallied Christian troops to ready for battle against spiritual powers – the sinister forces of evil, which are anger, greed, deceit, lust, envy, and the like. He beckoned followers of Jesus to wage war for truth, for justice, and for peace.

Paul said it far more poetically. He declared, "Stand, therefore, and belt your waist with truth and put on the breastplate of righteousness (a synonym for justice) and lace up your sandals in preparation for the gospel of peace. In all circumstances, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one."

Paul paints a powerful image. Rather than the weighty and cumbersome metal armor that would weigh them down and exhaust them, they were to strap on the light, but impenetrable armor of God.

When he was in seminary, Austin Shelley expressed his contempt for military references in the scriptures. Rather than passages that spoke of waging battle, he appealed to the image of beating swords into plowshares and the vision of the wolf lying down with the lamb. But one day he was silenced when a classmate said, "You prefer verses about peace because you have never needed a warrior God."

"His classmate was a Coptic Christian from Egypt whose home church had been the target of a terrorist bombing. He had needed to pray to a God who would fight on his behalf and protect his family and church from harm. He told the class about the Egyptian Muslims who showed up on Christmas Eve to form a human shield around the sanctuary to defend his church from further acts of terror on that holy day. Everyone sat in stunned silence."

“A couple of years after hearing that story, Austin’s third child was born with significant medical challenges. Over the course of the next four years, she would need multiple medical interventions, including life-saving surgeries. Over the span of those same years, he began serving as a pastor and discovered that there are many and varied circumstances in which people need a God who will fight for them as they battle addiction or anxiety, depression or disease, regret or rage.”

He says, “I still hope and pray, though, that when God shows up in the midst of these battles, God will look less like a warrior equipped (for a physical) fight and more like those Egyptian Muslims who put their bodies on the line to protect other children of Abraham.”<sup>2</sup>

In today’s passage, Paul is not advocating *passive* resistance, but rather *nonviolent* resistance. Paul expects followers of Christ to take the fight to the powers of darkness. We are to combat the enemy with the light of truth and the light of justice – but not without the light of peace.

When I ponder the dark powers of our world today, I think of racism, violence, addiction, lies, oppression, terrorism, homophobia, religious persecution, poverty, destruction of the environment, totalitarian states, political corruption, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, genocide, hunger, and the list goes on.”<sup>3</sup> These are the forces we are called to combat.

Paul’s words were addressed to Christians living in Ephesus 2,000 years ago, but I find them especially applicable in 21<sup>st</sup> Century North America. A recent poll conducted by the Pew Research Center found that “deeply negative views” of people in the opposing political party are three times as likely as they were 30 years ago. Instead of disagreeing with political opponents, many now see them as the enemy.

Adam Russel Taylor, the editor of *Sojourners*, reminds us that Christians can denounce and do battle with “evil and unjust systems, words, and actions, but still refuse to dehumanize or demonize those who are promoting them.”<sup>4</sup>

Demonize your opponent and it paves the way for violence. Just two weeks ago, someone tried to assassinate former President Trump. Two years ago, someone nearly killed the husband of Representative Nancy Pelosi. In 2017, someone shot and wounded Representative Steve Scalise. Before that, someone shot Representative Gabby Giffords.

The politics of revenge and retribution have become the order of the day, but followers of Jesus are to rise to a higher standard. Keep in mind that Jesus was fiercely opposed to the political leaders of his day – King Herod and Caesar – and he had harsh words for the religious establishment who collaborated with the political leaders, but there is no record of him advocating the use of physical violence against them.

Martin Luther King Jr. fought for civil rights and he opposed the Viet Nam War, but he always advocated non-violence. Just a few days ago, Jewish protestors expressed their opposition to the Israeli Prime Minister and the war on Gaza, but they did it by peaceful means. Acts of violence will not attract people to support your cause.

Followers of Jesus are not expected to sidestep the difficult issues of our time or to retreat from the battle, we are to strive for truth and justice and peace. But how do we do it in this season of hostilities?

The final piece of armor that Paul mentions is an offensive weapon – a sword. But it is not a sword that is wielded to harm, but to heal; not to strike a deathblow, but to strike a life blow. Our passage says that we are to “take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” The Gospel of John equates the word of God with Jesus who called on us to love one another – even our enemies. And in one of Paul’s letters to another church – the church in Rome, not Ephesus – Paul spells out the approach we are to take. He wrote, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

May we always strive for what is right and true and good.

#### NOTES

1. Haruko Nawata Ward, “Theological Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, (Louisville, John Knox Westminster Press), p. 376.
2. Austin Shelley, “The Armor of God and the Violence of the Bible,” *The Christian Century*, August 20, 2021.
3. Peter Rhea Jones, “Homiletical perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, P.377
4. Adam Russell Taylor, “After Political Violence, How Do We Love Our Enemies?” *Sojourners*, July 16, 2024.