

August 23, 2009

12th After Pentecost/Ephesians 6:10-20

“God’s Armor”

The movie “The Hurt Locker” depicts members of the debombing squad of the United States army during the War in Iraq. We watch them work on the dusty roads and in the busy cities trying to defuse road side bombs and suicide bombers. There was a constant vigilance and an uncertainty as to where the next bomb blast would come from.

They are at war but it is very difficult to know who the enemy is and where they are. It is like fighting a phantom, a shadow, someone you almost never see, or realize too late is the enemy.

Warfare now is quite different from warfare in the time that Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians. Rome reigned supreme, and the Roman empire was vast, held together by the disciplined Roman legions.

Religious minorities in the Roman empire were persecuted.

Christianity was illegal until 313.

The terms Paul uses – belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, sword, are taken straight from the Roman legionnaire’s equipment.

As Walter Wink points out in his book “Naming the Powers – the Language of Power in the New Testament” – “Armaments were both offensive and defensive. The shield, helmet and breastplate were for protection against blows. For attacking, the legionnaire had two seven foot javelins which he threw at the beginning of the charge. These had soft metal points that bent and stuck in opponent’s shields, rendering them too heavy to wield. Then when the lines closed the legionnaire used the short 2 edged sword to thrust up under the enemy’s shield and disembowel him. In such close quarters the long swords used by most of Rome’s enemies were rendered ineffective.....

The round shield of the legionnaires had long since been elongated, two-thirds covered his body and one-third covered his comrade to the left. This brilliant innovation encouraged tight ranks, since each fighter was in part dependent on his neighbour for protection.”

Matt Fitzgerald in an article in the Christian Century says: “In one of its collections the Art Institute of Chicago displays rows of medieval European weaponry –swords, rapiers, maces, daggers, helmets, shields and suits of armor – all encased in glass, every detail lit up by museum lights.

The tools of war are both frightening and beautiful, with their intricate etchings and gilded filigrees distracting the viewing from their brutal purpose. On my first visit I was struck by the neat correlation between tools designed for killing and tools designed to thwart killing blows. There is a helmet for every mace, a breastplate for every dagger and a shield for every sword. The pairing suggests defense and aggression sitting side by side in an arrested state. In bizarre neutrality, humanity's murderous intent is checked, blocked and stopped by the quality of its armor."

So Christians are dressed up in the equipment of warfare. Strike up the song "Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war"..... Here we go!

But who is the enemy and where is the enemy?

Like the U.S. army debombing squad we appear to be fighting an enemy that is like a phantom, a shadow, someone or something you never see or realize too late was your enemy.

Who or what is our enemy/enemies today?

Where does evil lurk in our world today?

Who or what needs to be slayed with the sword of the Spirit?

Paul labels the enemy of Christ's spirit, the evil we must battle against. He says – "For our struggle is against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Who or what is this?

Quite an enemy. The worst kind of enemy – seemingly everywhere but very difficult to see!

In Angola I got a sense of the power and hiddenness of this enemy. It is the power that causes there to be so much poverty when there is money around. It is the power that plants fear and uncertainty in the hearts of people. It is the power of injustice, corruption, violence, abuse. It is easier to see and name in Angola than in Canada.

Peter James commenting on this text from Ephesians says: "During a stint when I was preaching in New York City, in the days when you could go over to Union Seminary on Sunday night and drink hot chocolate and sing freedom songs, I began to hear about this exceptionally insightful lawyer by the name of William Stringfellow. Soon I was reading "Free in Obedience", in which Stringfellow tells of lecturing on the biblical idea of "powers and principalities" to divinity students at Harvard University.

They found the terminology archaic he says, but when he addressed students in the business school, who had done time tithing daily at the church of realism, they recognized the language immediately.....When the biblical image of the powers and principalities is recovered from the dustbin, it shines a revealing light on the modern landscape. We discover the frequent fallenness of money, sex, fashion, sports and religion in our culture. We are told that new fortunes are to be made while the military spending boom lasts. We learn that investing in the stocks of companies that market to human vices can earn us higher returns.....In unmasking the powers, one thinks of segregation, apartheid, fatalism, the Mafia, addiction, bondage of the will, totalitarian states, a celebrity culture of glamorized Bad Girls and Boys, serfdom in the medieval period, attempted bribery of legislatures through large campaign contributions, and genocide.....One thinks of Nazi philosophy, unbridled nationalism, violence, hunger, racism, obscenity, addiction, brothels in Mumbai, nuclear weapons, and tobacco companies.”

Freshly ordained I went out to minister to the people on a four point charge in Western Newfoundland. Armed with all my learning from Emmanuel College I preached rather early on nuclear disarmament! Not exactly a contextual sermon for the people in the pews there!
The principalities and powers can seem overwhelming to battle against .
Talk about David and Goliath!

In fact the piddling few stones we have at our disposal in face of the Goliath of the principalities and powers is more than daunting! It is beyond us. And that is just Paul’s point to the small Christian community to Ephesus and to us today. Our armor comes from God – our help comes from God who made heaven and earth. Our ability to stand firm is due to the power of God’s Spirit working in our lives.

The equipment we have to fight the good fight comes from God – our belt is God’s truth; our breastplate is God’s righteousness; our shoes are the gospel of peace; our shield is faith; our helmet is God’s salvation ;and our sword is the Spirit.
The armor is not our own making – belt, breastplate, shoes and shield belong to God. The pieces of armor in Ephesians symbolize qualities of God.

We stand firm in God's Spirit in the community of the people of God, the Church. We don't fight alone.

This text from Ephesians was originally formulated in a baptismal context, putting on our new humanity, being part of Christ's church. St. Paul is talking about Christian identity and the roots of our common faith. In order to stand firm we have to be nurtured in a tradition, a faithful community, and grow deep in its rich soil.

And above all "pray in the Spirit at all times."

Amen. Thanks be to God.