

“Practicing Resurrection: In the Armor of God”  
4<sup>th</sup> in 4-part series on Ephesians  
Delivered Confirmation Sunday, May 22, 2011  
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Ephesians 6:10-18a

Using strong military language to make theological points has become – as they say – politically incorrect. Grand old marching hymns like “Onward Christian Soldiers” and “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus, Ye soldiers of the cross,” which many of us grew up singing with great bravado, have fallen out of common usage, and I think we generally understand why. The language we use gives credence to the postures we assume. Historically, the Christian church became allied with military power, and far too often went to war under the sign of the cross – all the while professing faith in Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who blessed us to be peacemakers, urged us to pray for our enemies, and to resist violence by “turning the other cheek.”

As early as the 4th century, with the baptism of Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the religion of the empire, and went into great violence. Troops were ordered to paint the cross on the Roman shield with the words “in this sign conquer” as they marched many Barbarian tribes into the closest river for enforced baptism. And of course, closer to home and closer in time, we know how the bible was interpreted to support slavery, and has been used since to oppress and exclude certain categories of people, rather than to welcome and promote unity within our diversity. You see, if you imagine faith to be like a war, then you have to have enemies, and human enemies can be dehumanized so that you don’t have to treat them like they are also made in the image of God. We see all around the world today how religion imagined as warfare leads to horrific effects, which helps us understand the logic of avoiding military images for theological concepts about the mission of Jesus’ disciples.

I also understand why folks miss these old Christian battle hymns, and the gusto with which they were sung as we lined ourselves up from the Sunday school assemblies of yesteryear, and marched off to our classes to learn the stories of Jesus. Our current Presbyterian Hymnal came out in 1990 just a few years after I as ordained. The church I served then did what a lot of churches do when buying a new hymnbook. They invited members to purchase one for use in the sanctuary, with the invitation to have their name on a bookplate, in the front with space to dedicate it in memory or in honor of a loved one. I’ll never forget opening one of those hymnals once while I was leading worship and noticing that the bookplate read: Given by Colonel and Mrs. So-and-so In loving memory of – “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Many of us miss these old hymns, even if we do understand the political correctness of removing the warfare language. And the truth of the matter is that we do live in a world in which the Christian faith comes up against some formidable opponents.

In a few minutes our Confirmation Class is going to be asked: “Trusting in God’s compassion and grace for you and for everyone, do you promise not to return evil for evil and to strive always to love your neighbor as God loves you?” In order to turn from the ways of evil and its power in the world, to turn toward Jesus Christ, we have to acknowledge that our faith has serious opposition in our world and culture.

The language of our scripture reading – militaristic as the images are – is a helpful reminder of how we fight the good fight and promote the gospel of peace. The author of this letter to the Ephesians was aware of his church’s precarious social setting there in the middle of the First Century. They were surrounded by the military might and economic dominance of the Roman Empire. With pen in hand, he wrote what amounted to two chapters of ethical exhortations, counseling those early Christians against evil talk and gossip, unfaithfulness, deceptiveness and greed. Put away bitterness and disobedience. And if you take off and remove all those kinds of behaviors, here is what you can wear instead. “Put on the whole armor of God,” he wrote, “so that you may be able to stand up against evil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers and authorities, against the cosmic powers of darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil.”

Then he describes exactly what the armor of God looks like: “Fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As for shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. Take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench the flaming arrows of evil. Take on the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray at all times...” What the church wore, in that highly-charged atmosphere which, no more so than ours today, was important not only for their self-preservation, but also for the sake of the integrity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. (1)

And if you bring that language of God’s armor into your life, it can be really helpful when our faith comes up against our own formidable opponents. Most of us know what our battles are about – the small wars we wage: the daily struggle with the hurried, frantic busyness of our lives; for some our captivity to possessions; for others battling financial insecurity, still others crushing poverty. Some of us contend with slavery to success, others with what’s right to do regarding strained relationships, some are locked in battles with depression and guilt, and others in life and death struggles with disease. Peer pressure at school to do the wrong thing; longing to be in the right kind of crowd. Some battles we choose, and some come at us as if out of nowhere, but no matter the fight, God gives us this wonderful armor to protect us from what comes our way – truth around our waist; a relationship with God to cover our heart, peace at our feet, a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation. The discipline of prayer ready for any occasion.

The encouragement we are given is not to cloister ourselves, turning inward and away from the world. Nor is it of a holy warrior ready to strike down any human being in our way. Rather, the person who follows Jesus engages the world’s problems as he did, by depending on the paradoxically vulnerable defenses of things like truth, faith, and peace. No matter what we come up against – we are not left to our own devices. Instead, we are shown God’s way of dealing with anything that enters the

fray of our lives to pick a fight. By God's gracious armor we are equipped to practice the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A couple of years ago, a 31-year-old social worker named Julio Diaz waged a most creative battle in the streets of New York City wearing little more than the armor of God. Every night, Diaz would end his hour-long subway commute to the Bronx one stop early, just so he could eat at his favorite diner. But one night, he stepped off the No. 6 train, started walking toward the stairs, and looked up to see a teenage boy who held a knife. Diaz realized the boy wanted his money, so he gave his wallet and said, "Here you go." But then as the boy began to walk away, he called after him, "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm." Diaz reports that the boy looked up at him with a bewildered expression and then asked, "Why are you doing this?" He replied: "If you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money. I mean, all I wanted to do was get dinner and if you want to join me... hey, you're more than welcome."

Astoundingly, the teen agreed and went with Diaz to the diner, where they sat in a booth. At the diner, the manager, the dishwashers, and the waiters all came by to greet Diaz. The teenager said, "You know everybody here. Do you own this place?" "No, I just eat here a lot." The boy replied, "But you're even nice to the dishwasher." Diaz asked, "Well, haven't you been taught you should be nice to everybody?" "Yeah," the boy said, "But I didn't think people actually behaved that way." When the bill arrived, Diaz said, "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill, 'cause you have my money and I can't pay for it. So if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you." The teen didn't even think about it, and returned the wallet. Then Diaz gave him \$ 20, hoping it might help him. But he asked for something in return. He asked for the boy's knife. And before they left the diner, the boy gave it to him. (2)

My friends, we have these gifts – truth, peace, righteousness, faith, salvation – with which to practice – in our daily lives – the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

## NOTES

- 1) Ted Wardlaw, "You Are What You Wear," Central Presbyterian, Atlanta, 8/24/97.
- 2) Diaz story – npr.org found in Christine Lang's sermon "Entering the Fray," Brick Church, New York City, 8/23/09.