

Season after Pentecost

August 5 & 6, 2017

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Matthew 10:28-31; Ephesians 6:10-20

“The Armor of God”

Grace to you and peace from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

In 1988, then Duke University Chaplain, William Willimon, preached on this text about putting on the armor of God. In it, he share this story: “Last year I was talking to one of our students who is a member of a dormitory Bible study group here on campus. (Did you know that, according to our calculation we have about 50 such Bible study groups that meet every week here at Duke?) This student was telling me that he had never been in a Bible study group before, never felt the need of it back in Des Moines. ‘Why here?’ I asked. ‘Have you any idea how difficult it is to be a sophomore and a Christian at the same time here?’ he replied.¹

Since I began teaching the confirmation class here at Haven, I’ve heard the same thing from our middle school students — it’s tough out there. It’s not hard to say you’re a Christian. Lots of people claim the title, a church or wear a cross. A 2015 Gallup poll reports that 75% of Americans identify with a Christian religion.² What’s hard is living Jesus’ ways of kindness, generosity, welcoming the stranger, turning the other cheek, treating others the way you would want to be treated. Why is it so hard? Because, I say with all seriousness, middle school seems to be a microcosm of “the rulers... the authorities... the cosmic powers of this present darkness... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

We don’t generally speak about “cosmic powers of darkness and evil” in most mainline Christian churches. We talk about “*sins*” — those thoughts, words and actions that break commandments, separate us from God, hurt others and ourselves. But when St. Paul writes in his letters, “*sin* is a power rather than a type of human action.... Christian life, individually or collectively, means persevering in the still-contested arena of human life, standing when we would prefer to fold, or fight, or flee.”³ A seminary professor once told

my class to beware – We believe in the Holy Spirit of God but there is an unholy spirit loose in the world. We call it evil, sin, Satan, the Adversary — that which “opposes God’s desire that ‘the mystery of the gospel’ give joy on Earth”⁴ — and it is powerful, sometimes subtle and sometimes violent but always deceitful and enslaving. God WILL win this cosmic battle of good against evil, but in the meantime, beware. Evil, sin, Satan, the Adversary is a master of exploiting our vulnerabilities with deceit, disguise and seduction.

Why don’t we usually talk about battling the powers of evil at church? Maybe because we don’t know how to talk about it without turning it into a battle of opinions of what or who is causing the pain and chaos of our nation and world. Which seems to me to be an excuse. Or maybe we want to believe that we, on our own, with enough discipline, law enforcement or good will can conquer the beast of sin. Which the Bible and Jesus tell us is just wrong. On our own, we cannot conquer evil or the adversary. That needs God’s power. While we usually don’t address it in church, I think we know deep down inside that there is a battle raging within ourselves and around us between what is Godly and what is destructive. That’s why we **love** books, movies, television shows in which good – despite many trials and much opposition — triumphs over evil. From fairy tales to American westerns to Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Star Wars, Disney’s Beauty and the Beast — we cheer when good and the good guys and gals are victorious. In our deeps, we know there is battle going on between what God wants and what opposes the peace, love, mercy and grace of God. But what do we do?

I’d say first we acknowledge it. God can transform our faith and lives through a truth. Every ounce of me wants to avoid the image of a Christian be a warrior and singing “Onward Christian Soldier.” Warrior for the Prince of Peace seems an oxymoron. I see Crusaders marching to Jerusalem and slaughtering non-Christians. I see missionaries slinging the gospel threatening natives with death if they do not convert. I recall the governing forces used during the Spanish Inquisitions and the Salem witch hunts to protect the church from so-called enemies. We all have seen people in our own time beat people

up with Christianity, demeaning, discounting and discarding others who differ or disagree. So I want to discard any ideas that we are Christian warriors sent into battle.

Yet... Yet, Jesus's was a warrior, a different sort of warrior. He stood up for what was right and opposed that which was wrong at great personal cost. What the Crusaders thru the Westboro Baptist Church protesters seemed to overlook is that Jesus did not use coercion or violence. He reached out to those who were hurting and marginalized and stood up to the authorities when he saw them enforcing policies that ignored God's ways. In the gospels we also see Jesus do battle with Satan and temptation, relying on Scripture and God the Father instead of his own resources. In the end, Jesus laid down his life for his friends and enemies alike, so that we might know the God who has the power to raise the dead and defeat whatever enemies may assail God's creation. The battle may already be won in heaven but it is still going on here. One of the challenges of living faithfully is deciding, "Whose side will we be on" in this ongoing cosmic battle against darkness and evil. Equally important is doing battle as Jesus did — not with hatred, force, violence or arrogance — but with love, generosity, peace and grace.

I'm back to those confirmation youth who I will see again this September and those who have gone on to high school or college. My job, our job is to equip them for the daily battle with the shadows of darkness, the taunts of evil and the jabs of Satan. We're to help them to learn, as St. Paul said, "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh." We're not to hate or harm another child of God who, at the time, is an instrument of darkness, evil and Satan. Instead, we are to be "strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power" and stand firm in God's love. How can you do that in a middle school hallway or college campus? It's not only meanness and bullies they face each day, but the temptations of popularity over principle, of drugs and alcohol over the freedom of God's simpler pleasures, of joining in to avoid feeling left out. For that matter, how do any of us oppose the meanness, bullying and temptations disguised in a wide variety of socially tolerated demons?

St. Paul says this is what you do: Put on the whole armor of God. Fasten the belt of truth the gospel around your waist. Put on the breastplate of righteousness — not self-righteousness but right relationship with God and neighbor. Put on the shoes that allow you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. Always take with you the shield of faith — a trust in the goodness and love of God. Put on the helmet of salvation — God’s promises of eternal life and to be us always. So far, the armor is all protection. Armor of defense not offense, force or violence. But what of the sword of the Spirit, the word of God? We know God’s word can and has been used to demean, mislead and destroy others. That is contrary to the very word of God revealed in Jesus. In our hands, the sword of the Spirit directs our actions and keeps our focus on God’s Words, not our own often unreliable and fleeting feelings. A life walking with the sword of the spirit is a life lived faithful to the word of God. Living a life reflecting God’s ways and word is a powerful witness that brings Christ into a classroom, dorm, office or party. We bear God’s word but it’s God who makes something happen. And the final piece of the armor of God in Paul’s letter is prayer in the Spirit, which keeps us connected to the source of life, truth and love. These are our tools — God’s truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Word of God and prayer. Sunday school, bible study, devotional time and worship are to equip us with these tools. As Willimon wrote, “It’s tough out there. Paganism is the air we breathe, the water we drink.... You better not go out there alone, without comrades in arms, without your sword [of the Spirit] and your shield [of righteousness.]”

He continues, “So we must gather, on a regular basis, for worship. To speak about God in a world that lives as if there is no God. We must speak to one another as beloved brothers and sisters in a world which encourages us to live as strangers. We must pray to God to give us what we cannot have by our own efforts in a world which teaches us that we are self-sufficient and all powerful. In such a world, what we do here on Sunday morning becomes a matter of life and death. Pray that I might speak the gospel boldly” as God’s ambassador.

Willimon concluded his sermon with this story: A couple of years ago, I was invited to preach in the congregation where a friend of mine serves. The congregation is located in the heart of one of our great cities. The congregation is entirely made up of people who live in the tenement houses in that part of the city. I arrived at eleven o'clock expecting to participate in about an hour of worship. But I did not rise to preach until nearly twelve-thirty. There were five or six hymns and gospel songs, a great deal of speaking, hand-clapping, singing. We did not have the Benediction until nearly one-fifteen. I was exhausted.

"Why do [you] stay in church so long?" I asked my friend as we went out to lunch. "Our worship never lasts much over an hour."

He smiled. Then he explained, "Unemployment runs nearly 50 percent here, For our youth, the unemployment rate is much higher. That means that, when our people go about during the week, everything they see, everything they hear tells them, 'You are a failure. You are nobody. You are nothing because you do not have a good job, you do not have a fine car, you have no money.'"

"So I must gather them here, once a week, and get their heads straight. I get them together, here, in church, and through the hymns, the prayers, the preaching say, 'That is a lie. You are somebody. You are royalty! God has bought you with a price and love you as his Chosen People.' It takes me so long to get them straight because the world perverts them terribly."

With Willimon, let me say, "I'm glad that you are here this morning. I hope that this will be a time when you get your head straight, gain the equipment you need, see the visions you deserve, learn to name the name that saves because, it's tough out there."⁵ But we are not alone or unequipped. See you next week. Bring your armor of God ---- we'll work a bit more on it. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 8/5/17

ENDNOTES.

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1. William H. Willimon, "Get Ready for a Fight" The Collected Sermons of William H. Willimon Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010 p. 80
 2. Frank Newport, "Percentage of Christians in U.S. Drifting Down, but Still High" December 24, 2015 as posted on <http://www.gallup.com/poll/187955/percentage-christians-drifting-down-high.aspx>
 3. Mary Hinkle Shore, "Commentary on Ephesians 6: 10-20" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org 8/6/17
 4. Melinda Quivik, "Commentary on Ephesians 6:10-20" as posted on www.workingpreacher.org 8/26/12
 5. William H. Willimon, "Get Ready for a Fight" The Collected Sermons of William H. Willimon Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010 p. 81