

THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD; EPHESIANS 6:10-20; 8/23/09; THY/WPC

Our son Douglas, who is now stationed in Korea with the U.S. Army, said on one of his recent phone calls that he was out on a practice maneuver with full “battle rattle” as the combat uniform is referred to by the troops...100 pounds of gear.

The technology of this equipment he describes is amazing. Night vision capability; GPS tracking; laser technology and on and on.

Though I appreciate pacifist ideals I am not a pacifist and am glad we have a military that is, as much as we hear from our son, well equipped. I am glad because we live in a world where the use of force is sometimes the only thing that stands between life and death for innocent victims.

I am not unaware that the use of force has at times, under certain administrations, not been appropriately applied. Thankfully we have a system of checks and balances.

But my point is there are ‘forces of darkness’ call them, that counter, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes shrewdly and intently, the forces of good in this world.

These forces as Paul describes them are cosmic in nature. Our fight is not against human foes he says, but cosmic powers, the authorities and potentates of this dark world, superhuman forces of evil in the heavens.

And who having lived through any decade of the 20th century could deny Paul’s claim? From the killing of a generation of French and English troops with mustard gas on the front lines of the First World War to the Holocaust to the Korean War – referred to as the nastiest little war; to Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan and the ravages of terrorism not to mention Bosnia and Kosovo and Chechnya, South Africa, Somalia and Rwanda; who would disagree that there seem to be larger forces at work when it comes to humans killing humans.

It is the act of humans bringing suffering upon fellow humans that makes these events so inhuman, so incomprehensible, so other worldly.

This is the premise of this morning’s scripture reading – of Paul admonishing the Ephesians to put on the whole armor of God, to use the virtues and principles of a Christ-like life to contend with these dark forces, the things that destroy human community, peace and justice.

What is so helpful in Paul’s admonition is that he identifies this as a spiritual struggle or battle. This is the name he gives to it.

Not only do we need up to date and effective defense systems to preserve civilization and protect human lives, we need, according to St. Paul, a resilient and potent spiritual commitment: the belt of truth, the coat of mail of integrity, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit.

But my fear is that words like these sound far fetched, too ambitious for most Presbyterians, most mainline Christians. Why not tone it down? Slogans like ‘think before you act’ ‘exercise your rights’ ‘do the right thing’ all sound reasonable but they are clearly not what Paul is talking about.

Rather Paul uses vivid imagery to encourage the church to take on, to ‘put on’ a radical posture. He is talking about an intensive training program to equip church members to be effective soldiers in the battle against the dark cosmic forces.

Yet, as I say, such talk is too enthusiastic for most of us, for most Presbyterians, for most middle class folks of privilege. In part, because we have not experienced – other

than through our own personal struggles – we have not experienced the real destructive power of the dark forces.

I mean such things as survival in poverty in which so much of the world lives, or the threat of extermination because of our skin color or religious heritage or gender. I am saying, in general, middle class Presbyterian and mainline Christians may not have enough motivation to put on the whole armor of God, to undergo the training in spiritual warfare Paul is talking about because we have not suffered as much as the early Christians or those poor from the East Side of Buffalo to the ghettos of Bucharest.

Yet while we have remained less than spiritually vigilant a certain shifting of values or lowering of expectations has taken place.

Marilynne Robinson, the author of the Pulitzer Prize winning fictional memoir *Gilead*, addresses this change in our society in a series of essays on American religion and culture. In deference to something we call “Reality” she says we have given up on that old talk about alabaster cities and building mansions of the soul.

We have abdicated the very things which societies we admire are believed by us to value, things like education, the arts, a humane standard of life for all people, for the entire community.^[i]

This lessening of expectations for who we are and who we are called to be as children of God; this deference to the fiction we call the ‘real world’ happens says Robinson when fear is the lens through which we interpret our life and experience.

Anxiety-driven people have reason to be anxious. They are prone to stress and burnout, to illness and early death. They have trouble creating satisfactory friendships and families. They often misappropriate their time just sufficiently to allow their children to become ominous strangers. They have made a too single minded investment of their lives and find life increasingly one dimensional and lonely, if not inhospitable.

These things happen. Anyone who has ever glanced at a newspaper knows it. The bottom line is, says Genesis, we are not at ease in the world and sooner or later it kills.

The name for what we aspire to, Marilynne Robinson claims, is non-failure. Income and credit shrewdly managed, sophistication and image gleaned from the better shops and catalogs, systematically acquired.

It is because our hopes are so very modest, she says, that we can be made to fear that something might snatch them all away.

It is because we hope to acquire rather than to achieve – in the old language of religion, ‘to receive’ rather than ‘to give’ – that the limited and self-satisfying good we dream of and pursue can be taken from our hands.

But. But if we believe in significant numbers, as the annual Gallop Poll suggests, that we have a greater and different destiny than other created things...if we believe there is a God who hears the cries of the oppressed and who takes almighty and everlasting cognizance of our actions and our thoughts...then how would we see ourselves and our circumstances from this religious or biblical perspective?

What if we believe there is a God who is mysterious and demanding, with whom we are not easily at peace? What if we believe there will be a reckoning?

It is fascinating that such beliefs have not been seriously discredited, unless you count the recent atheist movement which is barely a blip on the spiritual radar. Nor have

they been consciously abandoned. They simply dropped out of the conversation. Whereas previous generations were inspired by their religious calling and beliefs to higher ideals and visions, ours, without that spiritual foundation, has lowered expectations.

And so we have adopted a very small view of ourselves and others, as consumers and patients with various illness and members of various interest groups, minor creatures.

So the problem for mainline religion is that we have lost the means of acknowledging the seriousness of being human and a profound anxiety the source of whose origins we cannot name lurks in the dark corners of our days.

We are spiritually lost and starving.

Shift back with me to Paul's admonition to followers of Jesus: what would it look like if we were to put on the whole armor of God?

Let me return to my son who is serving in the U.S. Army. He learned in basic training that the procedures and intensity of the program today is completely different from basic training before 9/11 and the wars in the Middle East.

The difference between now and before 9/11 is that before 9/11 basic training was geared to enable soldiers to learn procedures, operate equipment, and become familiar with Army regulations. After 9/11 basic training is all about enabling soldiers to stay alive. The drill sergeants who trained Douglas said many times if they said once, "what we are training you to do will save your life and the lives of your platoon members."

That's what it would look like to put on the whole armor of God. We would be operating as if our spiritual training was aimed at keeping us alive because we know that we are engaged in a life and death struggle in this world.

What is of concern is that there is very little evidence that the mainline church believes that at present. But the days are coming when we will change or die.

Engaging the spiritual practices as if they would make the difference between life and death – prayer, biblical study, service to neighbor, stewardship – if we embraced these things then Mainline Christianity would be transformed from a club into a church. From a social gathering into a Christian community. Mainline Christianity is teetering. Living the way of Jesus individually and together is all that will save us now. American culture has given up on the church as a serious social partner. All that it can be now, all that we can be now to survive is the body of Christ. Amen.

^[1] References to Marilynne Robinson in this sermon were taken from her essay "Facing Reality" in her book entitled, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Picador Press: New York) 1998/2005.