

Haydenville Congregational Church, Haydenville MA
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“The Whole Armor of God”

Psalm 84/ Ephesians 6:10-20

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight O God, our rock and our redeemer.

The apostle Paul, who is said to have written the books in the Bible we call the Epistles, or letters, wrote the book of Ephesians—that Beth read to us from today, while he was in prison.

I have not ever written anything in prison since I have not been in prison, and so while I don't know, I would imagine that the process would be particularly impassioned and have an urgency to it; having to convey a message with no other means than through the written word. I know there are some of among us who have had this experience, and written songs, poems, or, like Paul, letters.

At the close of his the *Letter from a Birmingham jail*, which he wrote while imprisoned. Martin Luther king said

Never before have I written so long a letter. I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?

I think that It is no accident that these “long prayers” and “long thoughts” written from the confines of the Birmingham city jail would yield a piece of writing that is so rhetorically strong, poetic, that has had such staying power...I imagine that when you are in jail, depending, of course, on the circumstances of your incarceration and the surroundings in which you find yourself, and of course, who you are, there is a certain urgency and passion to your communication.

You are literally behind bars, held captive, as Paul says, “in chains...” Paul is writing to his friends in Ephesus, one of the fledgling communities he has helped develop, who are facing persecution and inner turmoil, and you can

almost imagine him scribbling furiously on papyrus, or whatever he had to write on, himself sitting still and yet saying to them “*be strong in the lord, put on the armor of god.*” All he can do is sit there, yet he is like the commander in chief telling his people with passion and urgency that they should rise up against the principalities and the powers that threaten them.

So ironically, Paul is writing to the community and giving them advice—put on the armor of God and defend yourself against your critics, do civil disobedience, organize and rally, stay strong...

Yet it is as if Paul is speaking to himself too, because when we are trapped, in chains, we do not have the power to move forward, to dart outward into battle, to “act” so to speak. ... Often in a moment of crisis we want to take immediate action, even if the action is to flee... But Paul had nowhere to go,

To look at the warfare motif—there are two kinds of weapons, offensive and defensive... offensive weapons—swords, missiles, rifles, nuclear bombs, and so on... and then there are defensive weapons—armor... The former are designed to annihilate or at least harm the enemy... The latter are designed to keep yourself safe until the enemy backs away, and the doors of the prison swing open...

Stand against the wiles of the devil, Paul says... and surely the devil comes to each of us, at one time or another in our lives. When we are poor, in debt, when we have been abandoned or wronged... in Martin Luther King’s case been beaten down again and again in his struggle for righteousness and freedom in the Civil Rights work in Birmingham. He has been criticized and called an extremist... We are attacked by the wiles of the devil, so to speak, often when we are faced with a crisis, when we are isolated, alone, imprisoned... sometimes it feels it is the devil itself who imprisons us... and it is with him, with whom we go to war...

When, like in Paul’s case, there is nothing between us and our devil, we cannot rush out into battle. Paul had nowhere to go...

But ironically, the intensity of Paul’s convictions, the beauty of his imagery, the convincingness of his argument, the deep care and nurturing that he conveys to his friends in Ephesus, suggests to me that there is a strange opportunity when you are imprisoned. You cannot fight, you cannot flee.

You can only put on what Paul calls, in his letter to the Ephesians, the Armor of God.

One summer a long time ago I spent a summer in a rural poverty stricken community in the mountains of eastern Kentucky—coal county, Appalachia. I got to know a group of deeply religious people who called themselves “Holiness Christians.” Their pastor was an African American woman named Beaula. They were too poor to have a church building, and they worshipped in what was literally a shack down a long country road where most of this small community actually lived—called in Kentucky a holler—the place where those too poor to own almost anything live on the land they have been on for generations that they do not actually own. There were about 20-people that worshipped in this little church in this in this community stricken by prejudice, poverty caused by the exploitation of the coal industry, and generations of lack of education.

You will not be surprised to hear that they were also profoundly welcoming, profoundly spiritual and profoundly kind, and in their own way—
Profoundly wise.

Their worship services were intense and prayerful and joyful
And filled with praise. One of the hymns they sang most often
Contained the refrain “*I am blessed, I am blessed, when I wake up in the morning till I lay my head to rest, I am blessed, I am blessed...I am blessed.*”

But they also sang songs about warfare. They sang *Onward Christian soldiers, and I am a soldier of the cross.* (Songs we often do not sing here in our progressive new England church because we deplore violent imagery and decry the nationalized violence that has over the course of history, been done in the name of Jesus,)

They spoke often of deliverance from this world of strife
And of victory

Over the powers of darkness—

As they played out in their community—in alcoholism, depression, abysmal nutrition, and health, domestic violence and so on...

They were in many ways trapped in their lives, imprisoned, and so the enemy could not be defeated only with sword in hand--

Part of the battle can be *fought*—through resistance, civil disobedience,
—But for them, and for so many,

The enemy comes at us right where we are...

The enemy is in our own prison cell.
The enemy is in our own mind...
So they *needed* the strength to fight back, the imagery of God's encampment
in their midst, of the sword of Jesus and victory,
But they needed too
The words of Paul, saying, *be strong in the Lord,*
put on the armor of God---
the breastplate of righteousness..
the shield of faith,
the helmet of salvation...
They need the armor of God.
And so do we.

Howard Thurman, a little sung hero who studied with Gandhi and
Was Martin Luther King's mentor
Called the religion of Jesus, this very way of life
Paul was talking about from his prison cell
The religion for people whose "backs are against the wall."
The religion for us when we hunger and thirst for righteousness and victory
But are imprisoned by the powers that be,
More than anything that was the marginalized Jews in the Roman Empire
Whose God was a common criminal
And more than anything that was African Americans still faced with
segregation
and oppression a100 years after the end of slavery
And my friends in Appalachia still struggle with the ongoing effects of
racism and poverty in this county.
But also
It is us.

The best way to approach our battles Is not just with our weapons
--they alone are no match—but with the Whole Armor of God.
Every piece of it.

We are peacemakers and we are students of nonviolence. We are progressive
Christians and we are disciples of the Buddha, of Gandhi....we do not always
like to hear imagery about violence and war in the Bible, even when it is
about armor, and not swords ...we don't always even like to hear about
protecting ourselves from evil, and about the devil...But yet this imagery is
all over scripture, and there is a reason

why it is there....

We are creatures of great feeling
We are a human family complicated by the very forces
Of fear, greed, and rage that make us human
And Sometimes the only way to talk about
The way it feels when we have been deceived and disappointed
The way it feels when our relationships feel broken, when we are struggling
for justice but find only broken promised and destroyed agreements.
The way it feels when we cannot get along with the very mind and body we
ourselves have been given—when we are addicted, depressed, or terrified..
When we are at odds with our friends, our family, and our community
When we are in darkness and dissapointment and confusion
When we have lost a loved one and it feels that cavern they left
will never be filled
When the face of the person we love the most in the world
looks to us like a stranger
When we are facing down death itself and yet have no answers about a
future tat seems unspeakably fragile.
When whenever we try to pray we feel obsessed and distracted—by anger,
by self-doubt, by anxiety, by the bills we have to pay and by whether or not
we left the iron on at home.

The only way
To describe it is like it is waging war with the devil...
Because that is most exactly
What it feels like....

But the good news is, this devil can be thrown off guard...
his darts, says Paul, can be quenched...
and the irony of it all, that we learn from this passage
Just as we do from Martin Luther King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail
Is that the Religion of Jesus teaches us that we are sometimes at our very
most powerful
When we are in chains, behind bars, on the cross....
It is often when it is most urgent that we communicate our truth
because there is no other way out
That the words of God come pouring from our lips...

So where do we get this armor, you might be asking, in these days of modern warfare—
The blacksmith shop?
Wall mart?
Or perhaps you can order it from the UCC website?
Maybe we should have a church fundraiser to purchase two hundred and fifty sets of matching armor for all of us?
And some to spare, for new members (which we will store in the Children's Church costume closet for new members?)
(If we ever have any after the word gets out that the assistant pastor was preaching about the devil)

And what of this devil—how do we deal with him, or it?
Is there a sort of a reverse psychology?
A cognitive behavioral treatment through which we can teach him to leave us alone?

In all seriousness friends,
The devil is probably just the spaces where God is absent because war and violence and the sin of separation have squeezed him(or her) out.
But if that devil were red, with horns and a tail,
He would be nourished by self-doubt
Exceptionalism—thinking we are the only ones
Despair, giving up for good instead of stopping to rest until we are rejuvenated
And then carrying on.
Refusal to set limits for our own health and self-protection..
Denial—telling ourselves that we are not scared or confused when we are
Rigidness—being afraid that to apologize or change our minds or start again means we diminish ourselves.
Idealization—comparing ourselves to others or the present time to one that is past
Dualism—not seeing beyond the system of cause and effect in our lives that operates at the most superficial level, when really Gods universe is so complex we can only grasp it
in art, song, contemplation, work, nature, and love....
These are the devils food, his Multi Vitamins, his antioxidants.

And our armor—probably we were born with—
It's a matter of building it through our lives, oiling it, cleaning it,
Decorating it, strengthening it
With ongoing alterations and improvements
So that by the end of our lives
We are undefeatable....

Maybe our belt of truth is prayer and study.
Maybe your breastplate of righteousness is your work in relationships—to
come to the table even when you think you have had it.
Your foot armor might be the way you follow your passion—even if late at
night is the only time you have to write poems or paint.
A shelf of faith might be coming to church, week after week after week,
even when you find that you are doubtful, restless, or uncomfortable...
Your helmet of salvation might be mediating, wherever you need to, because
your mind is not always your most important organ, and it might even be
medical care, self-care, or psychotherapy..
Our armor is those resources we use when we are up against the wall
When we are in prison
When the devil we are at war with is not just in a foreign army
but right in our own kitchen.

Martin Luther King was sitting in a jail cell in Birmingham Alabama when
he wrote his letter from a Birmingham Jail; He said "*oppressed people,
cannot remain oppressed forever...the yearning for freedom eventually
manifest itself...I have been disappointed, he said, at being characterized as
an extremist.*" *but I have gradually gained a measure of satisfaction for this
label...for was not Jesus Christ an extremist for love.*"

Behind bars and in chains.
King wore the Armor of the Lord and spoke his truth.
His back was against the wall and he found an option.
May we pray to God do the same.

Amen.

