

The Spiritual Sword
(Ephesians 6:10-20; Luke 2:27-35)

8-25-24
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The reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians about putting on the "Armor of God" is a powerful piece of scripture that encourages us to think of our lives as being played out on a battlefield, against the forces of evil. It encourages us to see ourselves as committed warriors who have been given the weapons and armor we need and a duty to fulfill.

Being basically a peace-loving person, I've always been wary of religious language that presents war in glowing terms, especially in scripture. It easily hides the fact that Jesus himself was a man who refused to tolerate violence.

But on looking more closely at this passage it becomes clear that what is being described is not really violence against others. The battle is spiritual and the language of warfare is being used because in some ways, the challenges before us in life can only be understood and addressed effectively by using the language of warfare. And this passage from Ephesians does that.

The enemy are not “flesh and blood” people, but what the Apostle Paul calls “the cosmic powers of the present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places, that take possession of our human hearts and minds and turn them to evil purposes. And he personifies these mysterious forces by describing them as the work of the devil.

And so, when Paul advises us to put on the breastplate of righteousness and take up the shield of faith, it is to protect us against the spiritual “arrows” that are being unleashed against us by the “evil one,” through the action of rulers and authorities in high places.

And maybe the greatest tell that this passage is really about spiritual warfare is that Paul points to prayer as being one of our most potent weapons.

More than just Sheep

This passage, that encourage us to see ourselves as courageous warriors is especially important as a counter-balance to a misunderstanding we easily fall prey to each year on Good Shepherd Sunday, when we lift up the idea that to be a Christian is to be one of the “sheep” in Jesus’s fold.

Sheep are timid creatures, that are easily frightened. When they feel threatened they panic and give in to a herd mentality and run about governed wholly by their fear. And so, they need the safety of a pen and a caring master to protect and watch over them.

It is not a flattering picture of who we are. But it is a picture that contains a truth that we must accept. We have something like a default setting that is sheep-like in many ways. We are fearful of being singled out or of facing risky situations. And we tend to hide from danger in the safety in numbers. But that is not the whole picture.

And the passage from Ephesians reminds us that we are called to be warriors, and it reminds us that we have also been provided with the tools we need to engage in that most courageous battle of all; the spiritual battle to be Christ-like and to bring his kingdom into being.

And, interestingly, these two seemingly contradictory ways of portraying who we are, end up working together. Because when we acknowledge our fear and put our trust in the power of the Good Shepherd to keep us safe, it becomes possible for us to find the courage we need to fight on the battlefield God calls us to fight on.

Vigilance

I think that this idea that we are to be disciplined warriors is also important because when things are going reasonably well, we can be lulled into a kind of complacency. And the fact is, something akin to complacency is vital to our well-being. We need those times when we can just exhale, set aside the fretting and appreciate all the blessings of the moment. And we need to be able to pause and trust that many things will work themselves out. Otherwise, we would become basket cases.

The “evil one” knows this, and knows that these moments are also his opportunity to lay his deadly traps. He digs a pit and covers it with leaves, hoping that you will walk into it while you are walking along and blissfully not paying attention. And so, being in a state of vigilance and readiness, like a disciplined warrior is important.

The Sword

The weapon I find most fascinating in this reading is the sword. And of course, I’m talking about a “spiritual sword”. It is a powerful weapon for good or for evil; a weapon that is often also associated with our tongues and the ways we wield them.

Swords are designed to cut things in half. They are also designed to be able to cut things loose and set them free. And they are designed to wound or slay things in order to put them to death, very often by stabbing them or piercing them, like the way God pierces the heart of Mary with a spiritual sword in this morning's Gospel reading. (which is usually read during Advent)

A question that comes up when a spiritual sword is being wielded is, "Who is wielding it?" It isn't always clear, but the answer is important. Is it a human hand that is on the hilt or God's hand? Or maybe there are two hands on the hilt, one being God's the other being human. And who and what will be slain and what does it mean? The answers are not always clear.

For example when a church is cut in half by a contentious issue or a marriage ends in divorce, it can be hard to know whether the blow that severed the two was guided more by the hand of God's or by the hand of human ignorance? But it seems to me that when it is wielded by the hand of God it is an act of love.

The Sword of Love

I can't think of a more beautiful and personal way to describe what it feels like to love than to describe it the way Simeon describes does when he tells Mary that during the course of raising her son Jesus, that a "sword would pierce her heart." That is why I chose this Gospel reading today.

Later in the story, Jesus will wield the "spiritual sword", when his mother and brothers will come to him for help. He will cut them off and send them away, saying "Who are my mother and my brothers? And then pointing to his followers and saying, "Here are my mother and brothers, the ones who do the will of God."

With this stroke of the sword, Jesus cuts through the cord of loyalty to his blood relations, even to his mother who bore and cared for him. He cuts her off and leaves her hanging, at least for the time being, because as much as he loves her, not even family can be allowed to get in the way of his mission to serve the greater love of God.

Can you imagine the sword that pierced Mary's heart when Jesus spoke those words? It reminds me of the sword that so often pierced my own heart when my own son was separating himself from the will of his parents as young people must somehow do, in order to follow their own destiny.

Mary didn't argue with him and she let him go, probably swallowing her sense of hurt. A "sword pierced her heart." And she must have responded that way, keeping herself in chains, because she felt that it was in some way God's doing and that accepting the pain was part of loving him and seeing him grow.

And I guess I came to a similar kind of conclusion as a parent. Guided in part by the example of Mary, I began to consider that a significant part of my own experience of loving my own budding adult son was going to be swallowing the pain of the sword that pierced my own heart, as I allowed myself to be moved more and more to the sidelines in his life.

And now I think I can see the wisdom and redemptive power in having swallowed that pain, because it allowed me to come to love him for who he is and not what I wanted him to be. And now it seems to me that God was wielding the sword of love in all its glory and I'm glad that my hand was also on the hilt of that sword as it was being driven into my heart; even if I didn't quite understand the pain that God was inflicting on me.

It seems to me that sometimes when someone says something that really hurts, we should keep from responding long enough to consider

whether that pain may be the sword of God that is piercing our hearts. And when that happens, we have to be prepared with the shield of faith to hold off the arrows of temptation that the devil immediately rains down on us. Each arrow he sends offers us an interpretation of the situation that makes us feel justified in striking back with the sword that is our tongues.

That's when love really hurts and where the strength and discipline of being one of God's warriors really matters - on the battlefield where our every impulse is to strike back in anger and frustration. That's where prayer comes in, a prayer that we may recognize when the sword is of God and that the sword of God may slay all anger and hatred and deliver grace.