

“Resources for Engaging the Struggle”

Ephesians 6:10-20

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The passage of scripture we have read from Ephesians 6 about putting on the whole armor of God is familiar to many of us but also potentially problematic, given the militarization of religion these days. Many people think of Muslim extremists practicing jihad, but Christians have a long history of violence perpetrated in the name of God dating back to the crusades, and Israel’s response to Hamas’ horrible attack has been even more horrible. Furthermore, in Islam, jihad is first and foremost a spiritual struggle, violence is only allowed to defend the faith. Extremists, a tiny percentage of Muslims worldwide, though still a large enough number to wreak havoc, have distorted a noble tradition.

But with all these realities at work, we might not want to talk about the armor of God. One author has suggested that a high schooler might identify a different set of analogies: the T-shirt of righteousness, the backpack of faith, the hoodie of salvation. The word still stands for a sword, even if that word is found on a tablet or a Kindle (Katie Hines-Shah, *The Christian Century*, August 2024, p. 27).

Gentler though this may seem – I like the hoodie of salvation - it doesn’t pack the same punch, and what we have in Ephesians 6 is a metaphor. It is not meant to be taken literally. It is like the disturbing imagery Jesus uses in the reading from John 6. He does not intend for people to eat his flesh and drink his blood. It is a metaphor for relating to him in an intimate way. In like manner, the author of Ephesians does not want his readers to put on armament. He is thinking about Christian life while looking at a Roman soldier and he develops a metaphor.

We know this author is not talking about literal warfare because early Christians are pacifists, they are followers of the Prince of Peace. In the early centuries, Christians refuse to fight in wars. Early ministers often refuse to baptize soldiers, and later, when Christianity becomes an established religion, soldiers sometimes keep their sword arm out of the

water during baptism so as to be able to kill with impunity. Early Christians understand that their faith is antithetical to violence.

But not only do we know what the author is not talking about, we know what he is talking about – armament for spiritual battle. The armor helps us in our contest with evil, literally, “the wiles of the devil... For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,” he says, “but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” The armament itself points to this reality – truth, righteousness, whatever helps us proclaim the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, prayer. Are these the tools of warfare? Or are they spiritual resources to equip those who enter the great cosmic struggle between good and evil?

We may not believe in a literal devil with pointy ears and a pitchfork, but there is good and evil in the world. We can’t look at war crimes perpetrated in Ukraine; the startling realities of human trafficking; the persistence of racism, sexism, and classism; without realizing that there is more here than the consequences of poor human judgment. The Holocaust alone argues for the presence of the demonic. Though we need to be careful not to identify anyone who disagrees with us as evil, we must acknowledge the presence of evil and therefore a spiritual struggle, and we benefit from spiritual resources with which to engage it.

So what are these resources? The text begins with the belt of truth. A belt holds up clothing and keeps everything together. So does truth. Without it, we have no common ground with which to name and address reality. Yet over the past decade, we have lost our capacity for being honest, for telling the truth, for even agreeing upon what truth is. We have different versions of reality, alternative facts, certain points of view.

In *Return of the Jedi*, Luke confronts Obi-Wan and his previous statement about his father being dead. He had changed dramatically, he had become Darth Vader, Obi-Wan says, he was not the man he used to be, so to say that he was dead was true from a certain point of view... No, it wasn’t! He was dramatically changed, but he was not dead! And as Luke would contend and ultimately confirm, the essence of the man who was his father was still there inside Darth Vader.

We play too many games with the truth. We encounter and pass along massive amounts of information, especially online, that is distorted at best, and simply not true at worst. And we have almost lost the interest in, much less the ability for, verifying the truthfulness of claims before running with them. Clearly digital alterations, and now AI, are extending the capacity for distortion exponentially.

We plead with our children to tell us the truth, whatever it is, because we know how valuable honesty is, how dangerous dishonesty can be. And yet, we allow half-truths and outright lies to go unchallenged every day. There is nothing our world needs more than a return to truth. It is a critical resource for fighting evil. Responding to those who tried to find comfort in simple answers to difficult questions during World War II, English minister Leslie Weatherhead said, “There is no final comfort in a lie.” Indeed, only truth can lead to healing.

The text moves on to talk about the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation. These are all defensive resources. The author understands all too well that those who fight for what is good and right will meet resistance, fierce resistance. He is in prison for his beliefs, he describes himself as an ambassador in chains because is still representing Christ even there. And if this is Paul, he will die for his faith. Such a representative of Christ in such a time will need defenses like righteousness, faith, and salvation.

Righteousness has to do with right living, not just believing certain things, but living in a certain way, in a just and fair way, a way pleasing to God. In our time, when personal attacks have become the norm, the best defense is a life well-lived. We all have flaws and imperfections, we all make mistakes, but doing our best to live with integrity, practicing what we preach, provides an impenetrable shield against criticism.

Faith is having a deep trust in God, and if we have strong and genuine faith, we have nothing to fear. I remember someone in a church I served years ago worrying about young people going off to college and having their faith taken away by the educational process. I expressed a different perspective, saying we don’t need to fear new knowledge. We can trust that the deep faith our children and youth have developed will

endure many shifts in thinking. Our understanding of God may change, but no new idea wipes away the existence of God. Education may reveal the depth of our faith, but it doesn't take it away.

But I went on to suggest that in many churches, we taught children that too many things were true, like that the earth is the flat center of the universe or that it was created only 6,000 years ago or that God always protects us and those we love. When they learned we weren't telling the truth about those things, they began to wonder what else we weren't telling the truth about. So, the blame for doubt was on us. Teaching children the basics about God's love, encouraging them to question and think for themselves, trusting them and trusting God, rather than hammering in ideas and insisting on certainty, will benefit them in the long run. I am grateful to be in a church that embraces this approach.

Right living and genuine faith provide us with defenses or protections in a messy and hostile world, and so does salvation. This may not at first be clear, but if we are confident in our salvation, not only are we assured of love and acceptance, we are no longer fearful of death. In baptism, we die to death and sin, and thus they no longer have any power over us. This knowledge can be liberating.

One day after France surrendered to Nazi Germany, a pastor preached a prophetic sermon to a small village congregation, naming the Christian responsibility to resist the violence that would be brought to bear on their consciences through the weapons of the Spirit (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 3, p. 379). Those Huguenots protected 5,000 Jews, at great risk, but if you have the protection of righteousness and faith, and most of all, the assurance of salvation, life beyond death, the promise of gloryland, what is there to fear? What might we be willing to risk for others if we were as confident in our beliefs?

But while the text names a number of defensive resources, "weapons" we might say with some clarification of what we mean, it also names some offensive resources. It is often said that only one offensive weapon is named – the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. This "sword" is more of a knife, indicating that those who use the word of God when taking God's purposes of justice and love to the

world do so in proximity to others, which makes sense. The witness of Holy Scripture is best proclaimed to people we know.

But the sword of the Spirit isn't the only offensive resource the author names. He also says, "As shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." This proclamation is not simply defensive. We are called to be peacemakers, not just peacekeepers. We are called to take the gospel into the world as we seek to make disciples and work for peace.

Consider the scene in Matthew 16 where Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus says he will build his church on this rock – Peter or faith like his - and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. We imagine the church holding up against all the efforts evil might make, but this is not the image Jesus presents. Gates serve as a defensive resource guarding something or someone. And it is the gates of Hades that shall not prevail. The church is on offense! When we take the gospel of peace into the world, Jesus says, the world won't be able to resist it. We just need the right shoes on our feet.

I could launch into a tangent here, since I owned an athletic store that sold shoes. Some shoes are better than others for certain endeavors, like running or playing tennis. But we're not talking about literal shoes. We're talking about whatever propels us into the world with a message of hope. Is it conviction about the message? Is it awareness of the world's need for the gospel? Is it the capacity to overcome our timidity?

Michael has continued the tradition of youth summer Bible studies and breakfast at Bojangles but with a twist this year. They are doing the Bible study at Bojangles. It had to seem odd at first – cholesterol and Jesus – and awkward, but it has worked well. They are not pushing their study on anyone, but even the employees have listened in at times, overheard some of the discussion. The youth have found their shoes.

The bad news is there a struggle, but we know this already. The good news is we have not been sent into battle without any resources. We have all we need, so let us use it, not simply to overcome evil but to do good in the name of the God who has already given us the victory in Christ Jesus our Lord!