

Proper 16-B: August 26, 2018

Texts: Texts: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Psalm 34:15-22; **Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69**

Theme: God offers us his own armor that we might stand firm

Scripture: . . . *be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God* ... (Eph 6:10-11)

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In a few moments we will all sing the hymn, *Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus* (LBW 389)– one of the hymns that was requested for last Sunday’s hymn sing. Notice, however, that the text of this hymn uses very militaristic language. Verse 1 begins with the words: “*Stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye **soldiers** of the cross . . .*” Some modern-day Christians have questioned the wisdom of characterizing Christian discipleship with such military metaphors. Should a church committed to peace and justice and love of others use images of warfare and weaponry? In my former church, I quickly learned to notify a couple of people ahead of time if we were singing *Onward Christian Soldiers* because I knew they found the militaristic language of that text to be very offensive and upsetting.¹

I don’t know if there is anyone here at New Jerusalem who finds the use of military metaphors in our hymns that offensive. And some who don’t may very well role their eyes and think “how childish” of those who do. But remember there is some validity to this point of view. Terrible things have been done throughout history, all in the name of defending the Faith. Consider the Crusades of the Middle Ages when Christian soldiers slaughtered Muslims, Jews, and other Eastern Orthodox Christians. Or consider the cruelty employed during inquisitions to root out heresy. And in today’s world we regularly hear accounts of people being killed in the name of religion – whether it’s Muslims killing Jews or Jews killing Muslims, and not too long ago Christians killing other Christians in Ireland. We humans seem to have a proclivity to use force and weaponry in order to impose our will on others, and we often use our religious convictions as the justification for doing so.

Before we jettison these martial images, however, we need to examine them further. For there is a very real sense in which, if we are going to follow Jesus, we had better be prepared to defend ourselves in a hostile world. The words of this morning’s reading from Ephesians remind us that a life devoted to God may not be easy; indeed, it may be a battlefield. The imagery for both *Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus* and *Onward Christian Soldiers* is based on today’s reading from Ephesians where Christians are encouraged to “***put on the whole armor of God.***”

First, the author (considered by some biblical scholars to be St. Paul) calls his readers to “*Be strong in the Lord . . . and to stand firm against the wiles of the devil*” (Eph. 6:10-11). Then this author clarifies that the battle in which the disciple of Jesus is engaged is “*not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of the present darkness, and against the spiritual forces of evil . . .*” (Eph. 6:12).

¹It is not surprising that concerns over the use of military metaphors in our hymns have been widespread and vocal enough that several denominations have removed certain hymns from current editions of their hymnals. This includes the Presbyterian Church and yes, the Lutheran Church. Both *Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus* and *Onward Christian Soldiers* are in the green LBW, but neither are included in the more recent ELW book.

Some Christians shy away from a biblical text like this, believing it to be rather archaic and not consistent with scientific thinking. Somehow using the language of powers and principalities, much less language about the devil, seems irrelevant to some. Fortunately, the Church at large has not forgotten the biblical insight that there are powers at work in our world way beyond our imagining and outside our ability to control. When a person comes to this font to be baptized, we are all asked to reaffirm our profession of faith. Embedded in that profession are three questions:²

- *Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?*
- *Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?*
- *Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?*

The expected response to all three questions is, “*I renounce them.*” But please note the language used: words like “*devil;*” “*forces that defy God;*” “*powers of this world.*” When I have met with candidates or parents for pre-baptismal instruction, I usually ask them what they think these three questions mean – what exactly are they being asked to renounce? It’s perhaps not surprising that I am often met with questioning looks or blank stares as people struggle to articulate the depth and meaning behind these allusions. How would you articulate what it is that you are renouncing when you reaffirm the baptismal profession of faith? These are tough questions for modern-day people, because we don’t normally think of or perceive the world in this way with our scientific mind-set. Yet that’s exactly the way in which we actually *experience* the world – as a constant battle between good and evil.

I was helped somewhat with articulating this when I read one biblical commentator who wrote:

*In unmasking the powers, one thinks of segregation, apartheid, fatalism, the Mafia, addiction, totalitarian states, a celebrity culture of glamorized Bad Girls and Boys, . . . Attempted bribery of legislatures through large campaign contributions, and genocide. . . . One thinks of hunger, racism, obscenity . . . nuclear weapons . . .*³

I suspect we would find it relatively easy to add to this list of the “*spiritual forces of evil*” (Eph. 6:12): the power of greed leading to fraud in business activities; the desire for power, leading to corruption in government; a need to control others resulting in gangs, cults, or teen bullying. And we could add the multitude of addictions to which we are all susceptible.

We might like to think we can combat such forces in our own strength, but the writer of Ephesians believes otherwise and exhorts us to “***take up the whole armor of God, so that you can withstand . . .***” (Eph. 6:13). Note that the armor we are told to put on is God’s own armor – not armor of our own making. This armor is not simply some human virtue or value that we are asked to maintain; the armor is not some right behavior vs. wrong behavior we are to adopt. Instead, this is armor provided by God to help us to stand against incredibly powerful spiritual forces.

The Ephesians’ author would have been very familiar with Roman military equipment, as would most of the people who lived under the power of the Roman Empire, so he uses this imagery to make his point. We have a poster (*show poster*), which we will post on the bulletin board in the fellowship hall right after this service. Many of you are familiar with this poster as it’s been

²*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2006) 229.

³Jones, Peter Rhea, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3*. Ed.: David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville KY: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2009).

around NJLC for a long time, but it's always wise to review. Ephesians lists six pieces of equipment comprising God's armor. Note that most of these pieces of equipment are **defensive** in nature – they are designed to protect the person from assault, just like the equipment a baseball catcher uses to deflect flying bats and speeding balls.

- Belt of **Truth** → to keep us from giving into the world's beliefs;
- Breastplate of **Righteousness** → being honest, good, humble and fair to others – a willingness to stand up for others;
- Shoes to **proclaim the gospel of peace** with willingness and readiness;
- Shield of **faith** to quench the flaming arrows of the evil one who tempts us to doubt God;
- The Helmet of **Salvation** → our belief that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again;
- Take the Sword of **the Spirit** → the word of God to help us and others as we share God's Word that we might recognize our own dysfunctional thoughts and desires and help us to want forgiveness.

If we are shielded by this armor of God, we will be able to “*stand against the wiles of the devil*” (6:11) and “*withstand on that evil day*” (Eph 6:13).

How can we actually put on or take up this armor? The author Ephesians tells us: “*Pray in the Spirit at all times...*” In our English translation, this verse (Eph. 6:18) begins a new paragraph and sounds like a command. But in the original Greek text, this verse is a continuation of the preceding verse (6:17); it literally reads:

“... *accept the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit which is [the] word of God BY MEANS OF all prayer and supplication, praying at all times in [the] spirit...*”

We can put on God's own armor through prayer and supplication! Strength for the Christian soldier against the battle with evil comes from prayer.

When German General Erwin Rommel rampaged across North Africa during World War II, his panzer tanks seemed invincible. He struck with such cunning and blinding speed that many thought the “Desert Fox” was unstoppable. Surprisingly, what finally led to the eventual defeat of Rommel and his tremendous force was not a superior military power, but a simple **lack of resources**: the supply lines to deliver gas to Rommel's tanks broke down.

Don't let the supply lines break down; instead, **Pray in the Spirit at all times** as Ephesians advises in order to **put on the whole armor of God**. How? We are at the beginning of a new academic year – a time of resolutions – so if you're not already doing so, **set** aside a time for daily prayer. **Prioritize** weekly worship – regular attendance and participation in the life of the Christian community is like standing in that Roman military formation with many shields of faith surrounding and protecting you. **Find** a bible study group in which to study the Word of God, which is the sword of the Spirit – it's difficult to wield a sword if you don't know the blade from the hilt. And **Sing** – Sing songs of praise; one way to do that is through worship and praise, both here in this congregation but also at home or in or car with Christian CDs and radio broadcasts. Prayer and praise are ways of putting on the whole armor of God: of truth, righteousness, readiness to proclaim the Gospel, faith, salvation and the sword of the Spirit

HYMN OF THE DAY: *Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus*