

EPHESIANS 6:10-20 - PENTECOST 9 - JULY 30, 2023

As this letter to assemblies of believers in Laodicea, Colossia, Ephesus and throughout the great cities of Asia Minor draws to a close, the author offers a final extended metaphor for how a person of faith in Jesus as God's own anointed one, Lord over all, might shape the life of believers.

The addressees of this letter were very much a minority group in the first century. The language used to describe their God and Lord was very similar to the language used to describe imperial officials, especially the emperor. Even the word for their gatherings, *ekklesiae*, was a term for political gatherings at the local level. This letter, then, was written for people for whom their allegiance to Christ set them at conspicuous odds with the allegiances of others in their families and cities. Perhaps, for them, a certain kind of armour would be exactly what they craved.

It is impossible to think about this passage in 2023 without thinking of the many minority groups at odds with their overlords throughout the world. The message in this letter just might bring good news to those who are no longer able to participate in worship centred on the emperor or any of the gods honoured in their town, city, or family. Believers do not stand alone and forgotten in the difficult places created by faithfulness to God, and to Jesus Christ.

Instead, the beleaguered minority dares to trust that they are

enrolled with the Lord and the hosts of heaven and protected finally – if not lastly – by God's strength and might as they read: “*A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.*” Spiritual hosts of wickedness guide and manipulate world rulers of this present age, just as they have always done throughout history. But, the battle is not with other people. It is with the powers of wickedness

Yes, it can be dangerous to classify those with whom one disagrees as agents of evil. We have three protections against making this section of the epistle a warrant for warfare or oppression: First, this metaphor was written for minority persons; Second, flesh and blood opponents are not those against whom one contends; and finally, the very nature of the armour makes clear that the message here is a survival strategy for persons of faith in a hostile world, not a strategy for aggression.

Notice how the armour is designed to help the followers of Christ to stand fast; it is not armour for aggressive action. Standing fast does not require a person to hurt a neighbour in any way. "Standing fast", repeated several times, is clearly a very significant thread in this passage. The other Greek word that translates as “withstanding” has the same Greek word as the word for “standing fast”. Withstanding is necessary for standing. The armour is to empower believers to withstand evils that surround and threaten them.

Second, the nature of the armour itself is profoundly defensive. The

only equipment for attack is the sword. Even that weapon is a sword of the Spirit, aka, the word of God. Believers are girded in truth, faith, peace, the Spirit through the word, and in prayer for their defence and strength.

Finally, the boldness for which this armour empowers one is the boldness of witness in speech. Not all are expected to engage in such bold witness. This kind of speech, as we heard last week, would be a gift granted to some, but not all. Yet all share in this confident life in the midst of difficulty by perseverance in prayer for everyone. The armour is for individuals and their lives and, perhaps more importantly, the community as a whole is armed with faith, truth, peace, God's Spirit, and prayer. The words calling upon believers to stand fast are plural - not singular or individual.

One believer alone does not have to be a kind of Don Quixote for God in the midst of a godless world, tilting at windmills and not taken seriously. This passage calls for considered, corporate resistance to evil through the power of God, when and wherever it is embodied in the structures of the world one lives in. One testifies to that power, confident that the Lord who lives in the heavenly places has already won the battle.

This donning of the armour of God on our part, does not make us into an impenetrable community that does not hear the cries of others. It does not render us invulnerable to change or to hearing the

word of God uttered by others. In identifying the "mystery of the gospel" and calling upon believers to remain alert and praying for wise speech, the armour of God protects us from confusing standing fast with being rigid. Dark powers adapt readily, eager to draw believers from a life of faithful love. God's armour empowers believers through the millennia to grasp and resist such manipulation.

Stand firm. Take a stand. Stand up. Withstand. Probably most of us are uncomfortable using these war metaphors for faith. Military clothing and tactics, battle imagery ... it doesn't seem to jive with following the Prince of Peace, the one who defeats death. Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek and to pray for our enemies. The letters to the Laodiceans, Colossians, Ephesians, and other communities, tells us to clothe ourselves in compassion and kindness, to bear one another's burdens, to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice, to work together the way a body works together, to turn swords into plows and rely on the power of love. And yet in this stirring speech to end his letter, its writer, who, remember, although not actually Paul himself, is from the workshop of Paul, calls us to battle, **calls us to stand firm**, to hold the line against those powers and principalities that would dearly love to claim every inch of culture and creation for their own purposes.

The churches are to maintain strength, wearing the "armour of God"

in order to pray that the “mystery of the gospel” will be proclaimed. The proclamation is not about something knowable in the way we know a fact or a brute encounter. The proclamation is about something irrevocable (a crucifixion), unbelievable (a resurrection), and imperative (true life).

The letter concerns the proclamation not just of the gospel but of the mystery of the gospel, for the command to have life eternal through eating bread and drinking wine in Jesus’ name is, indeed, a mystery.

However, battlefield imagery is problematic for many Christians. A number of commentaries describe these six pieces of armour with varying explanations of what they offer to the faithful. One thing to keep in mind is that, while the pieces of armour constitute the garb of an individual soldier, in the context of serving as equipment for prayer, they are the armour of the church as a body. We wear these gifts together. We stand shoulder to shoulder as Roman soldiers would do, as today’s riot police do: an impenetrable wall of strength.

The belt holds up the toga so the soldier can move unencumbered by cloth. The “belt of truth” fixes what is necessary in such a way, that it leaves the church free and flexible, able to walk or run, loosed from what constrains or trips the wearer. The breastplate covers the core of the body. Righteousness protects the heart and lifeblood from cosmic evil. Shoes are for readiness to stand and speak peace.

The shield is defence against flaming arrows. Roman shields were leather, wetted against incoming fire, and large enough to cover the one who carried it and one-third of the person beside him. The shields were linked, so that, again, we can see the church, armed with faith, facing assaults from those who do not know the gospel is about peace.

The “helmet of salvation” reminds us of baptism, the cross of our foreheads. The only piece of this armour that can be used for offense is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”. Proclaiming the mystery of the gospel, the word of God both cuts and saves. In Lutheran terms it is law and gospel. Even this offensive weapon is for healing and peace, because, in Christian terms, the Spirit kills and brings to life.

The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the sword of God’s word ... none of these are for attacking. None of them give us an ounce of power over another person on earth. And the battle is not against human beings anyway. There’s nothing here about fighting each other – it’s all about standing fast in the face of powers larger than any one of us: corrupt governments, newspapers, gossip, hatred, racism, etc. But remaining quiet is the same as taking part.

Sometimes it seems that those who take a stand for truth and peace are indeed embattled in our world of spin and justification. Grace is

often in short supply, and even two thousand years after Christ defeated death we still face death-dealing powers every day: powers of sexism and racism, of nationalism and greed, of fear and power-mongering and self-interest. These cosmic forces are so much bigger than any one of us, even when we try individually not to give in to them, we can't help it – it's the water we swim in and the air we breathe.

These are not enemies of flesh and blood – there's no one person or nation or religion or ethnicity we can fight. Nor should we – that is not our call. Our call is to stand firm, to hold the line, to refuse to cede another inch to hate and fear, to violence and greed, to racism and sexism – so much easier said than done.

But the good news, the great news, is that this letter is addressed not to individuals, but to the whole community, the whole body of Christ, the church that is already doing this work and needs some encouragement to keep going. This is not about individuals tying each other up with the truth as we see it. It is about the whole body of Christ being held together by the truth of God's love. It's about the whole body of Christ lacing up shoes that will carry us near and far with a message of peace. This is about the whole body of Christ wearing these gifts together, standing together.

The shield of faith is the perfect visual. The shields of the Roman army were one-and-a-third persons wide, making sure there was no

break in the line; the army stood together, as each person was holding a shield that covered themselves and their neighbour. As long as the whole body stands fast and holds the line together, everyone is shielded by the faith of others. And, as John Bunyan noted in the Pilgrim's Progress, there is no armour for the back or sides. There is no option to turn back, only to stand together. It is the big picture version of turning the other cheek, which was a nonviolent way of resisting the powers that be, by forcing them to back down or to acknowledge your equality and treat you accordingly.

And stand we must. When the powers call for violence, we must stand together for peace. When the powers call for silence, we must stand together and speak. When the powers call for ignoring the plight of the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the immigrant, we must stand firm for justice. When the powers call for going along to get along, for endless expansion at the expense of creation, for using people for their own profit, we must stand firm against them and insist on a better, more just way.

The Body of Christ is clothed in the armour of God, in compassion and kindness, in willingness to bear one another's burdens and to rejoice with those who rejoice, in the belief that every member of the body is equally important.

Will we hold the line of justice when our brothers and sisters are

killed in the streets, standing firm and speaking the truth that life, including black lives, matter to God and to us? Will we hold the line of hope when our culture is fractured into marketing segments, withstanding the onslaught of those who would divide and conquer with greed and self-interest, insisting on God's desire for right relationship and wholeness? Will we plant our feet on peace when our leaders call for fear and violence as a means to achieve their ends, insisting that violence can never drive out violence? – Only love can do that!

It feels like an impossible task. And it is – but nothing is impossible for God. Remember when the Israelites left Egypt, and the Egyptian army pursued them to the banks of the sea – the people were terrified, and God spoke: “Stand firm, and see what the Lord will do.” We do not stand under our own power - we are gifted everything we need for this task. Now here, at the end of the letter, facing a world of uncertainty and persecution, comes the big speech. The one that the king gives as the army stands arrayed before him, to give them courage and hope as they make their stand.

In the classic allegory of the battle between good and evil, as found in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings series, the day comes when the men who stand for justice and peace are lined up outside the gates of Mordor, the land of shadows and terror and despair. They are surrounded and outnumbered by all the monsters of greed and hatred and violence and fear. And the king speaks to them before

they hold the line to give Frodo a chance to accomplish the task of destroying death:

*Hold your ground! Sons of Gondor, of Rohan, my brothers,
I see in your eyes the same fear that would take the heart of
me.*

*A day may come when the courage of men fails, when we
forsake our friends and break all bonds of fellowship, but it is
not this day.*

*An hour of wolves and shattered shields, when the age of men
comes crashing down, but it is not this day!*

Today, we fight. I bid you stand, Men of the West!!!

Here in this place and time, in the bonds of fellowship and friendship, we make our stand, with prayer and action for God's vision of the kingdom of justice, peace, truth, and grace.

May it be so.

Amen.

THE PRAYERS of the PEOPLE for JULY 30, 2023

Loving God, ever present friend of those in need, your Son Jesus has untied our burdens and healed our spirits. We lift up the prayers of our hearts for those still burdened, those seeking healing, those in need within the church and in the world.

Your Spirit gathers the church. With your grace, enliven bishops, pastors, deacons, teachers, visual and performing artists, poets and writers that they proclaim the gospel of peace in their own languages, using the gifts you have blessed them with.

Your Spirit animates the creation. By your power, renew the earth, beautiful beyond words, yet everywhere threatened with destruction. Fill us with wonder and awe for your handiwork, that we be steadfast partners with you in restoring and preserving land, skies, and waters.

Your Spirit enlightens the nations. By your wisdom, direct leaders of governments and international organizations, that your peace free those held captive by misunderstanding, divisive and oppressive worldviews that contribute to the abuse of power, violence and injustices done to people.

Even as we sing, even as we pray, Precious Lord, our thoughts turn to those for whom 'home' has become an uncertain and unsafe place, for whom 'home' is but a hope-filled dream. For those of us who know this place of safety and comfort, our minds strain to comprehend what its loss means to so many, and so we turn our thoughts and hearts to them this day.

To the Palestinian people of Gaza, that ancient land, where the death tolls mount almost daily.

To those suffering with soaring temperatures in Europe, Africa and regions of the United States and Canada, and those forced to evacuate and flee in the face of the numerous forest fires, and the effects of torrential rains and flooding.

To the people of Syria, Ukraine, Sudan, Gaza, Afghanistan, where so many have been forced from their homes and the lives they have known, only to become homeless refugees in strange and often-hostile places.

To the refugee children from Central America, fleeing violence and extreme poverty in their homelands, in the hope of a new home and welcome, only to be met by hostility, anger and fear.

To the casualties of the Ukrainian and Russian war, and destruction of homes, hospitals, roads, and bridges, including the great UNESO Cathedral in Ukraine.

To all the countless others, unknown to us but known to you, Benevolent God: those who roam the streets of cities with no place to lay their heads and nowhere to call home; those in the grip of dark depression who have lost all hope of ever having a meaningful life; those of us who are so far removed from the suffering of our sisters and brothers that we remain oblivious to what is their everyday reality.

Your Spirit revives body and soul. In your mercy, soothe the afflicted, uplift the sorrowful, comfort the grieving, and heal the sick.

Your Spirit energizes this faith community. Spur on young and old alike to use their creative talents, time and resources for building up the body of Christ.

Your Spirit raised Jesus from the dead. Baptized in his name, help us trust the Spirit's power now and in the life to come with all the saints.

Life-giving God, bring wholeness and healing to our lives, and to this world that you love so much, that we may acknowledge your wonderful deeds and offer you thanks from generation to generation, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen