

“The Armor of God”

Ephesians 6: 10-20

The Rev. Dr. Russell C. Sullivan, Jr.

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, August 28, 2024

In the lesson from the Gospel this morning, we heard two of the saddest verses in all of scripture: Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” The disciples could not understand Jesus’ difficult teaching about eating his flesh and drinking blood, a metaphor about participating in him and his life. What they really didn’t understand was this mystery of grace, that eternal life, the life God wants to give us now and forever, is a gift. It is not something we attain on our own. We follow Jesus not because we have certain answers; we follow him because we trust, as Peter says, that he has the words of life.

Because this commitment is so hard, many disciples turn away. Modern disciples – you and I – have the same struggle. A commitment once given to Christ in passion or in seriousness becomes weakened over time, becomes worn away by the struggles of life, BY DOUBTS ABOUT WHETHER BELIEF IN GOD MAKES SENSE, ALL OF WHICH CAN BRING ON A SPIRITUAL CRISIS. WE NOTICE when a devoted Sunday school teacher no longer attends church or when a beloved pillar of the church doesn’t show up anymore. We often panic when that happens, believing that the church may have offended. It may have, but it also may reflect that someone is in spiritual crisis, struggling with what it means to BE A CHRISTIAN OR TO BELIEVE.

“Do you also wish to go away?” Life is a constant struggle and challenge, and our faith is often challenged. We lose those we love. We face moral challenges. We struggle in our relationships with colleagues, church members, and families. None of us get through life without some scars to show for it, and some more than others. Someone once wrote (Harry Emerson Fosdick): “Life is essentially difficult. It begins in painful birth and ends in painful death and its fabric in between has dark threads running through.” Now won’t that bit of gloom just cheer you up today? But good news often begins in the context of bad news. If we live with the idea that following Christ is easy in this world, then we open ourselves to PROFOUND disillusion.

“Do you also wish to go away?” The church at Ephesus must have been asking the same question of commitment when facing difficult choices: “Will it be the way of Jesus or the way of Caesar and empire? Will you follow the Christ or the siren call of money and mammon? Which will it be, my beloved Ephesians?” Paul doesn’t mince words. He sees wavering commitment and wants to equip his people with hope in these struggles. To encourage them, he uses a military metaphor, wearing armor. As uncomfortable as the military metaphor may be for some of us, Paul is at home in using it because it expresses a great truth. It can be a struggle to follow Jesus, to remain faithful to the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And because it is a battle, we must prepare ourselves for the struggle. But it’s not just any armor. It will not be the armor of aggression or violence. It won’t be nano-technology or stealth technology or “shock and awe” because this battle is not against flesh and blood. It is a battle against the powers and principalities, that is, it is a spiritual battle against darkness. So put on God’s armor.

What does that look like? First, he says stand firm in your faith and convictions. It’s hard to stand firm when the tide of popularity turns against us. And we need help to do that. We need to be rooted and firmly grounded in our community, in the church and the journey of faith, to know what we stand firm for. To stand firm means to stand in something, to stand in our principles that are rooted and grounded in God and which transcend the world. And let me caution you, standing firm doesn’t mean being stubborn or unwilling to change or to listen to others or being close-minded or prejudiced. Having firm principles establishes a context for listening and negotiating. Martin Luther King, Jr., stood firm in the principle of non-violence, but how to accomplish objectives took a lot of listening on his part. That’s how you stand firm.

Next he says, Put on yourself the belt of truth. There are many truths we can expound, but here is a great truth in which to clothe yourself: This world and all its inhabitants belong to a loving God; evil cannot win. It may preen and posture and strut its stuff, and may take center stage for a while, but against the God of Resurrection, evil will fail. You may be discouraged now, this day, but joy will come in the morning. Evil will not be the ultimate victor.

Jim Wallis tells the story that when the South African government canceled a political rally against apartheid, Archbishop Desmond Tutu led instead a worship service in St. George's Cathedral. The walls were lined with soldiers and riot police carrying guns and bayonets, ready to shut down the service. Tutu began to speak about the evils of the apartheid system – how the rulers and authorities that propped it up were doomed to fall. He pointed a finger at the police who were there to record his words. "You may be very powerful – very powerful – but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost." In this moment of great tension, he softened, and coming out from behind the pulpit, he smiled radiantly and said, "Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side." Place upon your chest the breastplate of righteousness. There is nothing sweeter than the word "righteousness" or "justice", that is, setting the inequities of this world right, building a community in which hunger and poverty and violence no longer win the day. You may become discouraged in this task. But because it's hard to engage those struggles do not make it futile to do so or "pie-in-the-sky" to do so. In the kingdom of death which seems to engulf our world, God calls us, a church, to champion the kingdom of life and justice. Put on your feet the gospel of peace. Caught up in the battle of life, we need a center, a place of peace and rest, where God can heal our wounded souls so that we can carry to others around us the message of peace. "Come to me," Jesus says, "follow me, and I will give you rest." With peace in our hearts and on our feet, we can walk forward to face challenges.

Carry with you into battle, he says, the shield of faith, which is our true security, faith that God is with us. Faith protects us from crippling doubts and evil that overwhelm our confidence. Doubt and questioning are very human, but at some point we need a story to resolve them. I think then of faith as a story, as a perspective on this life. Some people, defeated by life's struggles, might think that this world is without meaning or purpose. While others might believe, that no matter what life sends their way, for good or ill, nothing can ever separate them from the love of God. I know which of the two copes better with the battle of life. Put on your head the helmet of salvation. The struggles of life wound us, bludgeon us into forgetting that there is a place of healing. Healing is the meaning of the word salvation at its root. We need healing and wholeness, the healing of grudges and bitterness and of memories, the healing forgiveness of our sins, the healing courage that enables us to stand tall and face the evils that confront us. And let the sword you brandish be the Word of God, the Bible. That does not mean using the Bible as a weapon to destroy some theological opponent or to score a "gotcha" in the vast amount of culture wars in which we find ourselves. I do not read the Bible in such a manner. I do not read the Bible as if it were an owner's manual with literal prescriptions about morality. I read it in dialogue with our context today. We bring our questions to this ancient word. For example, I believe that scripture and tradition bless women in the exercise of their reproductive rights and choices. There are also many texts in scripture that we cannot read literally; for example, the creation stories in Genesis are poetic and metaphorical. They don't explain creation scientifically, but they do affirm what we believe: that this universe is the creation of a loving God.

And I also read the Bible as God's Word to me. At one of the lowest points of my life, I read the words that Jacob spoke to God in Genesis, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." I read them as my words, my prayer to God at a time when I could not feel God or sense God's presence. After reading those words, I was determined not to give up in the battle of life, even to rattle the halls of heaven for a blessing. And so, always Paul says, "Pray!" The external world constantly distracts us, but we need an inner life too, an opportunity to be with God amidst the battle, and to saturate ourselves with God's promises and presence. Someone once said that prayer is not how we get God to do our will, but how we open ourselves so that God's will works in and through our lives. In the midst of darkness and struggle to be God's disciple, we must speak to God, utter our words of despair and our cries for healing. Amid the fight to be whole and human, even when we don't feel like it, we must say the words and keep saying them, for God has promised to come to us and to abide with us. For it's in prayer that we become liberated by God to be Christ's faithful disciple.

"Do you also wish to go away?" Don't give up. The battle is hard. The powers of evil are crafty, and they do no greater work than to distract us from loving the Christ, his way, and the world. But don't surrender. Don't give quarter. Put on the whole armor of God!