

Practicing Resurrection: In the Armor of God

Ephesians 6:10-18a

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Using strong military language to make theological points has become, as they say, politically incorrect. Grand old marching hymns like “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus, Ye soldiers of the cross,” and “Lead on, O King Eternal, The day of march has come; Henceforth in fields of conquest, Thy tents shall be our home,” which many of us grew up singing with great bravado, have fallen out of common usage, and I think we generally understand why. The language we use gives credence to the postures we assume. Historically, the Christian church became allied with military power and far too often went to war under the sign of the cross – all the while professing faith in Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who blessed us to be peacemakers and urged us to pray for our enemies and to resist violence by turning the other cheek.

As early as the fourth century, with the baptism of Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the religion of the empire and went into great violence. Troops were ordered to paint the cross on the Roman shield with the words “in this sign conquer” as they marched many barbarian tribes into the closest river for enforced baptism. And of course, closer to home and closer in time, we know how the Bible was interpreted to support slavery and has been used since to oppress and exclude certain categories of people rather than to welcome and promote unity within our diversity. You see, if we imagine the Christian faith to be a kind of warfare, then we have to have enemies. Whenever we name other human beings as enemies, we cease to acknowledge and treat them as children of God, made in the image of God. We see all around the world today how when religion becomes a holy warfare, it leads to horrendous oppression and suffering. Hence, we better understand the logic of avoiding military images for theological concepts when promoting the mission of Jesus’ disciples.

I also understand why folks miss these old Christian battle hymns and the gusto with which they were sung. Many of us have fond memories of lining ourselves up from the Sunday school assemblies of yesteryear, as we marched off to our classes to learn the stories of Jesus. Our current Presbyterian Hymnal came out in 1990, just a few years after I was ordained. The church I served then did what a lot of churches do when buying a new hymnbook. They invited members to purchase one for use in the sanctuary, with the invitation to have their name on a bookplate in the front with space to dedicate it in memory or in honor of a loved one. I’ll never forget opening one of those hymnals once while I was leading worship and noticing that the bookplate read: “Given by Colonel and Mrs. So-and-So, In loving memory of ‘Onward Christian Soldiers.’” Many of us miss these old hymns, even if we understand the political correctness of removing the warfare language. And the truth of the matter is that we do live in a world in which the Christian faith comes up against some formidable opponents.

We ask our Confirmation Classes: “Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?” In order to turn from the ways of evil and its power in the world, to turn toward Jesus Christ, we

have to acknowledge that our faith has serious opposition in our world and culture. The language of our scripture reading – militaristic as the images are – is a helpful reminder of how we fight the good fight and promote the gospel of peace. The author of the Letter to the Ephesians was aware of his church’s precarious social setting in the middle of the First Century. They were surrounded by the military might and the economic dominance of the Roman Empire. He wrote two full chapters of ethical exhortations, encouraging those early Christians against the use of the old defenses like evil talk and gossip, unfaithfulness, deceptiveness, and greed. Put away bitterness and disobedience. If you take off and remove all those kinds of behaviors, here is what you can wear instead: “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand up against evil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers and authorities, against the cosmic powers of darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil.”

Then the writer describes exactly what this armor of God looks like: “Fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As for shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.... Take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench the flaming arrows of evil. Take on the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times....”

The protective clothes that the church was supposed to wear would protect them in that dangerous atmosphere which was no more so than ours today. This light weight resurrection armor was important not only for their self-preservation, but also for the sake and integrity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Clothed in the spiritual gifts of Christ, as in Kevlar for protection, they were free to move through their troubled world as bold, generous, brave, and compassionate disciples.

If you make room for this language of God’s armor in your life, it can be really helpful when your faith comes up against our own formidable opponents. Most of us know what our battles are about. We wage war with the daily struggle of balancing rushed and stressful lives. Some of us run up against an oppressive captivity to possessions; others of us contend with financial insecurity, still others excruciating poverty. Some of us draw our swords as slaves to success; others contend with what’s right to do regarding strained relationships. Some are locked in crosshairs of depression, regret, or guilt and still others in life and death struggles with disease of body, mind, or spirit, peer pressure at school to do the wrong thing, or longing to be in the right kind of crowd. Some battles we choose, and some come at us as if out of nowhere, but no matter the fight, God gives us this wonderful armor to protect us from what comes our way – truth around our waist, a relationship with God to cover our heart, peace at our feet, a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation, the discipline of prayer at the ready for any occasion.

The encouragement we are given is not to cloister ourselves, turning inward and away from the world. Nor is it of a holy warrior ready to strike down other people in our way. Rather, the person who follows Jesus engages the world’s problems as he did, by depending on the unlikely and vulnerable defenses of things like truth, faith, and peace. No matter what we come up against, we are not left to our own devices. Instead, we are shown God’s way of dealing with anything that enters the fray of our lives to pick a fight. By God’s gracious armor we are equipped to practice the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A couple of years ago National Public Radio reported an amazing story about a 31-year-old social worker named Julio Diaz who waged a most creative battle in the streets of New York City wearing little more than the armor of God. Every night, Diaz would end his hour-long subway commute to the Bronx one stop early, just so he could eat at his favorite diner. But one night, he stepped off the No. 6 train, started walking toward the stairs, and looked up to see a teenage boy who held a knife. Diaz realized the boy wanted his money, so he gave his wallet and said, "Here you go."

But as the boy began to walk away, he called after him, "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm." Diaz reports that the boy looked up at him with a bewildered expression and then asked, "Why are you doing this?" He replied, "If you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money. I mean, all I wanted to do was get dinner, and if you want to join me... hey, you're more than welcome."

Astoundingly, the teen agreed and went with Diaz to the diner, where they sat in a booth. At the diner, the manager, the dishwashers, and the waiters all came by to greet Diaz. The teenager said, "You know everybody here. Do you own this place?" "No, I just eat here a lot." The boy replied, "But you're even nice to the dishwasher." Diaz asked, "Well, haven't you been taught you should be nice to everybody?" "Yeah," the boy said, "But I didn't think people actually behaved that way."

When the bill arrived, Diaz said, "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill, 'cause you have my money, and I can't pay for it. So if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you." The teen didn't even think about it and returned the wallet. Then Diaz gave him \$20, hoping it might help him. But he asked for something in return. He asked for the boy's knife. And before they left the diner, the boy gave it to him.

My friends, we have these gifts—truth, peace, righteousness, faith, salvation—with which to practice in our daily lives the resurrection of Jesus Christ. All we have to do is take off our old protective gear and lay our earthly weapons down, whether they are the acerbic arrows of rage or the benign shields of resignation. We just have to take off those heavy, outdated, militaristic camouflaged clothes that have in the past felt way too comfortable, in order to put on the armor of a new life in Christ. This armor is light and life-giving and enables us to move about freely with truth, righteousness, peace, and faith.