

Proper 16B'18
26 August 2018
John 6.59-69; Ep. 6.10-20
St. Luke's Episcopal Church
North Little Rock, Arkansas
The Rev. Carey Stone

*Finally brothers and sisters, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.
Amen.*

Ray Glover was the church musician and scholar that edited what would become The Hymnal 1982 – the hymnal currently used in the Episcopal Church. I had a couple of classes with Ray when he was on the faculty at Virginia Seminary. He talked about some of the challenges of producing a hymnal. One of those challenges was what to do with some of the hymns that promoted militaristic themes and imagery. Something of a battle ensued (pun intended) over whether these hymns should be taken out or left in. Some of them didn't make the cut such as the *"Battle Hymn of the Republic."*

One hymn that was particularly protested but did make the cut was *"Onward Christian Soldiers."* The lyrics tell us a truth that is hard to hear, that there is a spiritual battle being waged and that we are to follow Christ into the cosmic battle between good and evil, God and Satan, between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God. The music written by Sir Arthur Sullivan of Gilbert & Sullivan fame, adds march-like rhythms completing the militaristic effect. While it's imagery and themes may trouble us some it does us a big favor by telling us about the world as it is and not as we might have it. Our baptismal liturgy directly confronts us with three levels of evil that we are faced with on a daily basis: First there is the cosmic level when we are asked: "Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God? This is literally evil in high places. Second, there is the systemic level: "Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?" This evil manifests in our corporations, institutions, and political policies.

The third is evil on the personal level: "Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?" This is the evil that can dwell inside of our own hearts and minds.

Several years ago I was in another city at a different church and everyone was visiting out on the parking lot. The conversation centered around evil as we had sung the hymn, "A mighty fortress is our God." One of the lines in the hymn says: "And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us." Someone in the crowd said, "You know, I don't much believe there is a devil." Before thinking I quickly blurted out these words, 'Well, when you have met him you don't doubt!' As Alex Haley the author of *Roots* noted, *"Either you deal with what is the reality, or you can be sure that the reality is going to deal with you."*

The baptismal liturgy reveals the reality that it is only with God's help that we can deal with the three-pronged evil we face. St. Paul to the Ephesians says for us to "be strong in the Lord." He then uses the military metaphor of armor to communicate how we can face and triumph over evil: *"Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."*

The next thing Paul says is so important if you don't remember anything else from my sermon remember these words: *"For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness."* This present darkness wants for us to become focused upon flesh and blood enemies rather than the dark powers that drive them and that they themselves have fallen victim to. When we find ourselves divided up into categories of "us" and "them" we need to remember that there is a much more powerful foe - "they" that is, the powers of darkness that are committed to all of our demises regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or political affiliation. Certainly human beings can be used to perpetrate evil by the dark forces but Human beings are not the real enemy.

I didn't realize when I was writing this sermon that Sen. John McCain would be dying the next day. I won't soon forget Senator McCain's response to a person at a town hall meeting during his run for president against Barak Obama. A person in the crowd came to the mic and said that they could "not trust Obama as president because he was an Arab," and to that McCain said, "No, no, he is a decent, family man, and citizen that I have fundamental differences with." He did not nor would he allow someone else to 'demonize' his political opponent. He was able to disagree with respect. If you would like to see it for yourself you can watch this interaction on YouTube

St. Paul reminds us that we are called to go out into the world as soldiers of the Light wearing spiritual armor. He starts with "the belt of truth" we stand for the truth and we speak that truth in love. He then says for us to "put on the breastplate of righteousness." Walking in integrity and trusting in God's ability to make us right this is what protects our heart. Then he says to put on the gospel shoes: "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace," The words and actions of life that put an end to hostility and hate and brings peace and reconciliation.

Then he says to take up: "...the shield of faith that is able to repel all the flaming arrows of the evil one." The shield of faith can stop the penetration of evil words of accusation that attack us. Then we are to place on our heads "the helmet of salvation" this knowledge that we are God's beloved children protects our brains the very seat of the soul from divisive darkness that seeks to alienate us from God.

Finally the only offensive weapon that is offered, "The sword of the Spirit which is the word of God." Remember Jesus in the wilderness of temptation when Satan approached him, what did he do? He would respond to the demonic offer by quoting from the words of scripture. That is what we need to do is to know the scripture well enough to confront the dark lies with the light of truth.

To be forewarned is to be forearmed. To be a follower of Christ is not an easy road, in fact at times it can feel like a battle, but Jesus the captain of our salvation goes before us showing us the way towards radical love for God, for our neighbors, and for ourselves.

*Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane,
But the Church of Jesus constant will remain;
Gates of hell can never 'gainst the Church prevail;
We have Christ's own promise,
And that cannot fail.
Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before!*