
Stand Your Ground

Ephesians 6:10-20

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, August 26, 2018,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

There's an old Sunday School song that says:

*I'm in the Lord's Army, (yes, sir!)
I'm in the Lord's Army, (yes, sir!)
I may never march in the Infantry,
Ride in the cavalry,
Shoot the artillery.
I may never zoom o'er the enemy,
But I'm in the Lord's Army (yes, sir!).*

But let's be clear, this song is not in the musical canon of Duke University Chapel! What this children's song, to the tune of 'The Old Grey Mare,' reveals, however, is the historical intersection of military imagery and Christianity. As the old hymn declares, "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus, going on before...." Christians, throughout history, have waged bloody crusades in the name of God. Soldiers, armies, and wars are not atypical in church history nor is the imagery of battles unavoidable in the Bible.

Ephesians takes all of this to another level, literally. To a supraterritorial level, beyond our earthly terrain. "Put on the whole armor of God...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, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places...take up the whole armor of God." The writer of Ephesians might as well have been singing, "Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war..." This is a cosmological struggle that touches the earth and the struggle is real. We don't need the last few weeks to remind us of this as we hear about sexual abuse against children and women in the church—evangelical, Catholic, every single denomination and tradition are indicted. No one is immune from struggle. For students, I'm not thinking of your roommate's peculiar habits of cleanliness though they could be a struggle for you. Or, for faculty, I'm not talking about your students' habits of showing up late to your class though that might get on your nerves.

This spiritual struggle is cosmological, sociological, anthropological, psychological, emotional, relational. Battles on high and low. The addresses of this letter were a minority group in the first century. Their allegiance to Christ put them at odds with the expected sociopolitical allegiances of that day, so perhaps a certain kind of armor is exactly what they desired.

"Put on the whole armor of God...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, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places...take up the whole armor of God." There are principalities and powers beyond human control and sight. They're beyond our reach and just because we don't see them, doesn't make them any less real. New Testament cosmology presents the powers as legion, multiple, not just one thing, but rulers and authorities and cosmic powers. According to lawyer and social activist William Stringfellow, "People are veritably besieged, on all sides, at every moment simultaneously by these ... various powers, each seeking to dominate, usurp, or take a

person's time, attention, abilities, effort..." These powers are not merely spiritual but material and affect our world; this is why apostle Paul is "in chains," in jail, in the material world. Spiritualization is linked to materialization.

Yet, what's so critical to keep in mind is that we don't wrestle against enemies of blood and flesh, that is, human beings; we are not each other's opponents. Our struggles in life, in society, are really manifestations of other powers and spiritual forces at work. Human faces can change but the same evil remain in place. We are not each other's enemies, really, but our enemies are the forces of evil. Those powers aim to keep us divided. And the church and nation are so divided.

We see this material-spiritual struggle in our country where any difference is often used to divide and neighbors, families, human beings are torn apart because of religious, racial, sexual, political, educational, social differences when differences don't mean there have to be divisions. There can be mutuality even as this letter speaks to this in relation to husbands and wives, Christ and the church, children and parents, slaves and masters. What's threatened in this spiritual struggle is oneness because the distorted way of disunity and division is so easy. What's celebrated earlier in the letter is the 'mystery of the gospel'(3:4-6; 5:32) which is the unity, the one body formed by Jews and Gentiles. And this is where the true struggle is—wrestling with the powers that want to destroy any realization of unity and mutuality.

And to withstand what so often pulls us apart, will require the strength of God because it is weakness that divides but strength in God that unifies. Even with the glorious vision of a victorious Christ earlier in the letter who "has put all things under his feet,"(1:21-22), this letter closes with a sober message about this cosmic struggle and declares, "finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power."

You may have been wondering, "Where is God in all of this?" Let me ask you, "Where are you in all of this? What are you in, through all of this?" Are you "in the Lord and in the strength of his power"?

To be in God makes sense in this biblical setting because you have the possibility of wearing God. We are told to "put on" the whole armor of God, the same verb used earlier when we are told to clothe ourselves or "put on" the new self that God created in Christ. In putting on this armor, we are wearing God and clothed in God's virtues. It reminds me of an ancient Irish prayer:

*May Christ shield me today,
Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit,
Christ when I stand....*

No part of the body is unprotected because in God our protection is complete. God doesn't leave us vulnerable but gives us something to wear. God provides resources for us in the struggle. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes to make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, a helmet of salvation, and a sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. When you wear God, the armor of God, it is clearly not a strategy for violence, aggression, and offensiveness and the armor is a tool of defensiveness. The only equipment

for attack is a sword but it is a nonviolent weapon of the Spirit, the word of God. When you wear God, you embody a nonviolent ethic and spirituality. Where is God in all of this? God is on you.

Putting on this armor, being clothed with God in this struggle, calls for certain strategies. Let me highlight two of them as we begin a new academic year. The first is to stand. Multiple times, we hear “stand against the wiles of the devil” “take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore...” Stand your ground. Very different from the “stand your ground” law in some states where it often provides a license to use force and violence and deadly means to retaliate against threats. Here, ‘stand’ is about peace and faith and truth. Wearing God, wearing this armor, can help you stand firm. When attacked or misunderstood, it is not time to call names and return hate with hate; it is time to stand your ground, not to justify use of violence. Rather, ‘stand your ground’ means “I trust God enough to protect me. I am fashioned by God as I wear God’s fashion, clothed in the virtues of Christ. I can stand my ground because I stand on a firm foundation.”

The second strategy is to pray. “Pray in the Spirit” “pray also for me” “pray that I may declare it boldly,” Paul says. In the Spirit, prayer, like the word of God, becomes a part of God’s spiritual armament. In the struggle, you may not be able to pray it away, but you will be able to pray through it. And remember, prayer doesn’t change things, God does. Prayer doesn’t change things; prayer changes us. Stand and pray. Wearing God changes us in the end. Many engage in other tactics in our society; I don’t have to name them but they don’t seem to be working out so well.

‘Standing firm’ is not something we can do alone but must be done in community together as indicated by the plural verbs and pronouns in this letter. Paul couldn’t do it alone so he asks for prayer. The flaming arrows are too great for any one of us but together we can stand against the powers as we wear God’s truth, peace and faith. We can clothe ourselves in Christ and embody a different kind of ethic in today’s world.

Stand your ground this year and don’t give up your Christian identity for a political party. Stand your ground this year and don’t give up the love of Christ for hate in the heart. Stand your ground this year and don’t give up the desire for unity for the demons of divisiveness because the mystery of the gospel, unity in Christ, is worth it. Stand firm in faith this year and make a decision to put on God over your whole life.

My daughter has always been the clothing fashion police. One day, I went to work wearing a free-flowing multicolored shirt. Later that afternoon, I received a text from my daughter saying, “Dad, if you really, really, love me, you won’t wear that shirt to my soccer game.” And being the great mischievous father that I am, what did I do? I boldly went to the game and strutted to the sidelines wearing that shirt. With God, it should be different. If you love God, you’ll wear his fashion to soccer games and everywhere else you go. May it be so this year.

*Though hordes of devils fill the land
All threat'ning to devour us
We tremble not unmoved we stand
They cannot overpower us
Let this world's tyrant rage
In battle we'll engage
His might is doomed to fail
God's judgment must prevail
One little word subdues him.*