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St. Matthew Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 6:10-20

Parables and Pop Culture: The Gospel and The Hunger Games

Will read the scripture in a moment, but by way of summary: The Hunger Games is a series of novels about a yearly contest in which 24 young people are chosen randomly, a boy and a girl from each of 12 districts, and put in an arena and made to fight one another until there is only one victor left standing. The Games are a reality show that the country is forced to watch.

That is horrific enough, but the Hunger Games are actually a means of social control. The Capitol, which is the city that oversees the games, stages this event as a way of reminding the districts who is in charge. It's the elites' way of saying, *Don't you dare forget that we are the powerful ones and you are so weak and expendable*. Many of these districts already suffer from poverty and starvation; the Hunger Games are just the final blow against any hope they might have of bettering their situation.

(By the way, you may know that crucifixion served a similar function. It was reserved for low-status defendants, not for Roman citizens and members of the elite. It made an example of those who threatened the Roman social order: runaway slaves, those who attacked the property of the powerful rich, those who committed treason by claiming power and rule not authorized by Rome. Jesus' crucifixion indicates that he is perceived by the ruling elite to pose a threat to the status quo.)

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.
Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.
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. Therefore 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, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

* * *

A friend of mine sent me a cartoon this week in which one character said to another “My desire to stay informed is at odds with my desire to stay sane.”

I feel the truth of this comic!

Watching the news, it is very easy to lose heart sometimes.

What can we do? How are we called to respond to the turmoil in our world?

Paul was addressing a church with a similar question on its mind. And for Paul, the world he lived in (and the world we live in now?) can be understood as a cosmic battle between good and evil.

How are we to respond?

Therefore 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.

In *The Hunger Games*, the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, volunteers to fight in place of her sister Prim. The male tribute from district 12 is a boy Katniss's age named Peeta Mellark. There is a conversation between Kat and Peeta as they prepare to enter the arena the next day. Peeta says, *Whatever happens tomorrow, even if I die, I want to die as myself. I don't want the Capitol to take that away from me. I won't let them turn me into something I am not.*

Katniss doesn't understand: *What difference does it make if you're dead either way?* It seems foolish to care about such things.

But Peeta knows: in dark times, we may not prevail, but we can remain faithful to the values and principles that we hold dear. We can keep the faith. *Who will we be* in this world, as we seek to serve God and love as Christ loved? That is the question. As Viktor Frankl realized in the death camps during the Holocaust: "Everything can be taken from a man or a woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Paul would approve of this impulse of Peeta, and of Viktor Frankl. The battle is on, Paul writes, and so we must clothe ourselves with the things of God:

The belt of truth;
the breastplate of righteousness;
the helmet of salvation;
and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

You may have heard of "fight or flight." But the armor of God equips us for a third task, which is to *freeze*: to stand with integrity and courage, where we are. Note that the only offensive weapon in Paul's list is the word of God. Everything else is armor, for a defensive purpose. We are not meant to be on the attack. We are not people of destruction. We are people of the Word, and the Word is love.

Now, Katniss says she doesn't understand Peeta's desire to die "as himself." But her behavior shows that she does understand, very well.

Katniss befriends a fellow tribute named Rue. Rue is young, like Prim. She is not tough or strong—an alliance with her is not a tremendous asset to Katniss. But Rue is clever and her heart is true, and she and Kat are able to gain a couple of advantages over the others... but then, sadly, Rue loses her life.

And something breaks open in Katniss.

Remember that the Hunger Games is a reality show. Everything the tributes do in the arena is broadcast for the entire country to see. Katniss knows that a hovercraft will be along soon to pick up Rue's body and remove it from the arena. Katniss feels moved to do something to acknowledge her friend but she knows she doesn't have much time. She must show the Capitol that there is a part of her that they cannot control.

And so she gathers white flowers and places them around Rue's head, in her arms, around the body. She does this in memory of her friend, in recognition of her dignity, her worth, not just as a pawn in the Capitol's power games, but as a human being. She does this so everyone will see, and know.

There is a dignity that can never be taken away.

The interesting thing about the book is that it's told from Katniss's point of view and hers alone. She does not know what effect her honoring of Rue might have, if any. What the movie makes clear, however, is that her actions inspire the people of Rue's district to rise up. A revolution is beginning that will unfold over the three books in the Hunger Games trilogy. And it begins with an act of goodness and grace, in which Katniss refuses to be a pawn.

Now here's what's brilliant about Paul's words. He gives us these robust images of armor:

Belt!
Breastplate!
Shield!
Helmet!

And we might picture chain mail, a suit of steel like a medieval knight. Or maybe kevlar. Something bulletproof. But then there's this reversal: The armor of God is made of...

Righteousness.
Truth.
Peace.
Faith.

Which turns out to be pretty thin armor. When you're wearing righteousness, truth, peace, faith, you still feel the pain of the world. You still hurt when others hurt. To clothe ourselves with the things of God does not protect us from grief. But it gives us strength to stand in faith. It gives us hope and courage to fight another day.

In the days following 9/11, writer Sally Schneider found herself wandering the deserted and devastated streets of New York, and finding a restaurant open. It was Mario Batali's Italian restaurant. Mario himself said, "Yes, we're open," and welcomed them in. There was something so comforting in the food people shared in that place—as if life were normal, somehow. It almost felt defiant... like Katniss decorating the body of an "expendable" tribute with flowers.

Sally described the experience later to a friend—*What was it about that meal that made it so significant?*—and her friend said, "Of course. We fight back with beauty."ⁱ

Since then, "fight back with beauty" has become one of my touchstones, in the wake of so many events like it, when faced with systemic injustice and planetary peril. We fight back with beauty.

We don't fight back with beauty because it will move the cause of justice and peace forward. We don't do it because it's the most effective way to be.

It might be, and we hope it does. But we do it because that's all there is. The alternative is passive oblivion.

I'm told that St. Benedict, in his rules of monasteries, put in a quirky little provision about new novices—new members of the community. He wrote that newcomers who were ready to take their vows would surrender their street clothes and receive the clothing of the monastery... but their street clothes would remain in an unlocked closet, next to the traditional Benedictine attire. In this way, the monk would have to make a choice each day to live in the spirit of the community. Will I choose this way of life again? Will I put on the identity of the monk once again?ⁱⁱ

That is our task...
to fight back with beauty.
to fight back with righteousness.
to fight back with peace, and grace, and truth.

May we do so, armed only with the Word of God... the Word which is Love.
Amen.

ⁱ Sally Schneider, "Batali's Beautiful 'F--- You': A Tale Of 9/11," *Improvised Life*, September 11, 2011, <http://www.improvisedlife.com/2011/09/11/batalis-beautiful-fuck-you-a-tale-of-911/>.

ⁱⁱ Craig Barnes, "Boxed In," *Christian Century*, August 15, 2013, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-08/boxed>.