

The Rev. Anne Largent Smith

Sermon preached at St. Mary's Episcopal Church Elk Grove (Sacramento, California)

August 23, 2015

Proper 13B: Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

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I have looked forward for quite some time to this passage in Ephesians. The armor of God is something that I think is such a helpful metaphor. We are given tools that help us in our life of faith, and here Paul lists some that are tools that are part of a battle—not like the battles that the Roman army was waging throughout the Mediterranean region, but a spiritual battle. And even we who live in relative peace and safety now continue to face spiritual forces of darkness: those flaming arrows of the evil one.

I read this week that shields, being made of wood at the time, were highly susceptible to arrows that had been lighted on fire and shot at opposing forces. This is the metaphor that Paul is working with here. Now I have never seen a flaming arrow, but I have I think encountered some of those metaphorical arrows that are still shooting our way, as it were.

One I remember from when I was about 22. Keith and I had started graduate school in Maryland. (No, I did not get a graduate degree in Maryland; I quit. But he did.) We lived in the College Park area, and there was a mall we used to go to. I think it tells you something, how well I remember this, actually. We went to Burlington Coat Factory, and I just remember this woman who was there with a child, I'm assuming her son. And he was little—maybe Zoey's age, maybe littler. And this woman was clearly miffed at him. And as we crossed paths, I heard her say, "I will never forget what you did this morning." And I have never forgotten that she said that. And I would lay money on that mom not remembering actually whatever it was her kid had done.

But that was I think one of those flaming arrows. One of those little shards of darkness that enters our lives that shapes everything that follows. I think that there are messages like that that are for me pretty easy to identify because that's part of my own personal struggle. If you struggle from depression, those things are going to stay with you, and they're going to whisper to you for the rest of your life.

But there are plenty of ways that the evil one may sling his arrows at you. And I think those messages are death-dealing. That could be stuff that your family told you or taught you. It could be the way people treated you. And it could be messages about what it looks like to be a successful person, whether that's career success or personal success or whatever.

But Jesus gives words that are life-giving, not death-dealing. Jesus calls us to his life-giving way. I think that whereas those death-dealing words are words that make us want to hide away the brokenness and the hurt and the failures of our lives, Jesus's life-giving way is an invitation to offer ourselves in all our humanity to be honest about who we are and to give ourselves to him because we depend on him for our life. And an invitation to unite ourselves with him, ignoring all those other messages, trusting him as our source of life, and indeed taking him into

ourselves—again here’s that metaphor of the bread and wine being the body and blood of Jesus, the very food our Savior gives us to take him into ourselves that we might be united with him.

There are a lot of alternatives—what I like to think of as counterfeits—that claim that they are the way of life. Jesus offers us a way to life that involves sacrifice and honesty and self-giving, but there are a lot of other promises of ways to life that don’t deliver. Some are more subtle than others. The American Dream is an obvious one; that’s a pretty big one. The stock market is one. That old “pulling-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps,” that’s one. Like you can save your own life. I think that commercials are an insidious source of these messages, these counterfeits, these suggestions that there’s a way that you’re going to be happier, better, more perfect, there’s a way that you can show up like you are doing a-okay—if you buy this product, if you try this plan. And then there are all the ways that people tell each other that they’re doing it wrong, and “you should do it my way, my way is better.” It’s the way we interact with each other. It’s the way that we, desperate for life, seek to find the way that is life.

But the way that leads to life is Jesus’s way. And it’s often difficult or counterintuitive or strange. That’s what Jesus’s followers heard him say when he was talking in this synagogue in Capernaum and so many said, “This is a difficult teaching. Who can follow it?” So difficult that many of those in that larger group of followers that Jesus had quit at that moment, said, “This is too hard. We don’t get this.”

Now I grew up in a church and in a family that really liked to put on appearances. And there are churches that will tell you that if you have problems you’re a bad Christian. Or if you’re different, you’d sure better hide it. There’s this message that says, “Don’t admit that you can’t do it.” “Don’t admit that this is hard.” “Don’t show weakness.” “Don’t admit you don’t know everything”—that was big in my family. “You’re supposed be perfect and in control and know how to get this done”—and get it done. There are churches that will tell you that.

But Jesus is saying you’ve got to go on encountering all these challenges, all these things that you can’t do, in fact, without God with you. And you’ve got to continue to choose life, and continue to tell the truth, continue to claim the promises of God. It is indeed a spiritual battle. We don’t become Christians and life becomes hunky-dory and we’re exempt from problems; quite the opposite.

So here comes the armor of God. And the armor of God is going to help us walk in this way that leads to life. Now I’m going to be honest with you: I hate belts. (This morning when I said that in the first service I realized I’m wearing one right now.) And sometimes I need one. I really am grateful for clothing that does not require a belt to stay put on its own. Truth be told sometimes I really do need one, but I avoid putting them on.

Now the armor of God starts with this belt. Thank God it’s a metaphor. I don’t know what the metaphorical equivalent of your trousers falling down is, but I know that in this metaphor of the armor of God, that belt is the belt of truth. And I take that to mean that we gird ourselves, we

encircle ourselves, we surround ourselves with the truth. How do we do that? Make it such a part of our life and environment that it's present all around us as we encounter the messages that would tempt us to trust in some other source for life, that would be flaming arrows to pierce us. So there's the belt of truth, the truth about who you are and who God is, the truth about what really matters.

There's the breastplate of righteousness. My first thought is about good deeds, or trying to do good deeds. We think of righteousness in terms of people who do right. But I think that more than that—because we're not always going to do right, that's not what that's all about—I think more than that it's a matter of claiming the reality that we are forgiven, that Jesus is our righteousness. That our breastplate, this thing that protects our heart from those flaming arrows, is our forgiven status as God's children. Which is huge, and I think really difficult—it's difficult for me to remember that that stuff that we did that we had to confess, “we did it wrong”—it's been wiped away.

Then there's the gospel of peace to make your footing sure. The gospel of peace having a double meaning here because of course there's God's word, but the gospel of peace—Jesus is peace. So this is Jesus himself. I was reading this week about the footwear they would have worn in the Roman army. Their footwear would have been like a leather sandal or a short leather boot. And often they drove nails through the bottoms of their shoes so that they would have basically a cleat that would help them stand firm. This is what the gospel of peace does in our lives, so that we are ready when we are challenged because we have the gospel of peace to answer.

We have the helmet of salvation. We have the sword of God's word at the ready to protect us and fight for us, that word that gives us life.

So I suggest that though there are many messages in this life that will tell us things like “What you really need to do in order to be happy is X”; “What you really need to do in order to be secure is Y”— or messages that are a little bit rougher to hear, like “God doesn't love you”, or “You're never going to get it right.” That we counter those with these gifts that God has given us of his word, of faith, and truth, and forgiveness, and claim our ability to be honest about ourselves, and to know God's love revealed to us, and the forgiveness that God has offered us, and the power of God to help stand firm and to give us life.  
Amen.