

Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church
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August 23, 2015
Newark, Delaware

Psalm 84
Ephesians 6:10-20

“From Strength to Strength”

This scripture lesson is designated by the lectionary for this Sunday, but my memories of these words ... these emphatic instructions ...run back in my mind for many years.

fasten your belt,
put on your breastplate,
take your shield,
put your helmet on, pick up your sword,
“the whole armor of God.”
I resonate with that.

And I remember, along with that scripture and those instructions, that I was stirred by the hymn:

*Onward, Christian soldiers, Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus, Going on before.
Christ the royal master leads against the foe.
Forward into battle, see his banners go.
Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus going on before.*

At Vacation Bible School, when I was a child, we would march from our opening assembly to Bible classes and to crafts, singing “Onward, Christian Soldiers, marching as to war.”

For the first two years (probably when I was 5 or 6 and attending a neighborhood Church of God – because my dad was working weekends and nights at the steel plant for the war effort) – but then, after the war, we drove downtown to the tall steeple Presbyterian church where my parents had been members for some years ... But both Vacation Bible Schools were similar and Onward Christian Soldiers was their marching song.

And then the Bible lesson for the assembly was, frequently it seemed to me, based on Ephesians 6, and there was a colorful flannel-graph of a boy and girl, putting on their armor to go out and do battle with the forces of evil, which I had no trouble identifying as Doyle Runkle and Bobby Stouffer who lived several blocks away and were the bane of my existence as I walked home from school..

“Put on the whole armor of God,” Paul wrote. I’ve always been fascinated by armor. Two weeks ago when Pat and I were visiting my brother Ed up in Connecticut, we took a field trip to New Haven and visited the Yale Art Museum. In their collection is a life-sized portrait of a warrior outfitted in helmet, breastplate, chain mail, heavy shield, threatening sword. It’s all quite impressive.

“Put on the whole armor of God,” Paul wrote followers of Jesus in Ephesus during the early days of the Christian church. The people of Ephesus were used to seeing the helmets, breastplates, shields, and swords of the Roman Legionnaires patrolling the streets of the city, marching through to demonstrate authority and to keep public order.

“Put on the whole armor of God,” also reflects an infant church’s struggle to survive in a time and place and among people who were largely indifferent but who, at a moment’s notice, could become hostile, and rope or nail dissenters to crosses that dotted crossroads and hilltops across the lands they ruled.

Paul believed that the church, representing the truth of the gospel, was at war with hostile, cosmic forces, “spiritual forces of evil,” powers opposed to the reign of God. And his advice was to take it seriously and to do battle with an arsenal. **But, he urged, an alternate arsenal.**

Too often we miss that part. The **alternate** arsenal is truth, righteousness, peace, faith, the word of God. The belt he urged them to put around their waist was truth; the breastplate, righteousness. It is a skillful and eloquent exercise in metaphor.

The fact is, however, that the Christian church has all too often eagerly become allied with blatant military power. We miss the metaphor. Rather, we cling to the literal. It began in the year 312, during a war between two Roman generals, each of whom claimed to be the emperor: Constantine, son of the emperor who had died, stood over against Maxentius. Constantine's army was encamped at the Milvian Bridge, on the outskirts of Rome. On an October evening in 312, as the armies prepared for battle, Constantine had a vision: the cross and the words "In this sign conquer." He ordered his troops to paint the cross on their shields and, the next day, in battle they prevailed. They killed and captured thousands of Maxentius's troops.

Up until that time, Christianity had been an underground movement, a strange sect, worshiping in secret, frequently persecuted by the state.

But after the Battle of Milvian Bridge, the new emperor, Constantine, ended the persecution and ruled that it was no longer illegal to be a Christian and to follow Jesus.

Constantine was baptized on his deathbed, and his successor, Theodosius, made Christianity the official religion of the empire. The cross became the authorized logo on Roman shields and decorations. And it wasn't long before victorious Roman legions were marching defeated Barbarian tribes into the nearest river for Christian baptism. Or, if they refused Baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit they were marched into the river to drown. Some church historians believe that was the worst thing that could have happened to Christianity.

Theologians and Church historians trace the long tension within the church between those who live by the Constantinian model, with cross on shields, the church ultimately acting like a real nation state with real power, financial and military, and who crave to bring back those good old days. And those who believe the church's task is to practice the values of Jesus, which are often in conflict with the policies of the empire.

Christian pacifists look at scripture, the words and life of Jesus, and our sad history and conclude that the way of Christ is

essentially pacifist and that followers of Jesus cannot engage in violence of any kind. Down through the centuries they have made a brave and important witness.

Others, often defined as Christian realists, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr for instance, believe that it is at times necessary to take up arms, to defend one's self, one's family and nation and values, and that there is no conflict between Christianity and a military capability.

But these people, and many others add that the cross should not be on the shield or emblazoned on bombs and Christians who find themselves in military conflict should not only have a weapon ready but a heart aching at the tragic inability of human beings to live God's will for peace.

What's the point of the text – the sermon title? The phrase “From strength to strength” comes from Psalm 84, a beautiful hymn, Ed Crispin read this morning. “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! . . . Happy are those whose strength is in you. . . . As they go through a parched valley they make it a place of springs.” Strength here is revealed not in defeating an enemy, but in cultivating and nurturing life, transforming an arid, dry valley into a lush garden. Strength here is for the purpose of life and goodness and truth, mercy and peace. All a part of Paul's alternate arsenal.

The point is that violence rarely ultimately changes the dynamic. War begets war. Defeat generates smoldering resentment. Humiliation breeds enduring bitterness. Winning too often results in the smug acceptance that I am the one who is right. Might makes right – and THIS IS OF GOD.

Ironically, I believe it is the New Testament that is ultimately realistic. I believe that it is Paul who is, in the long run, wonderfully practical and that the work of faithful people and faithful churches, is to give voice to that alternate arsenal he proposes. Yes, to practice that alternate arsenal... exercising truth, righteousness, peace, faith, mercy ...the ways of Jesus.

I wonder, if Jesus meant for his followers to rule the world, then why did he teach them to wash feet?" The heart of Christianity is the radical, counterintuitive affirmation that the most powerful force in the world is vulnerable, sacrificial love, love that looks weak and helpless but which, finally, as St. Paul promised, "still stands when all else has fallen"; God's love, expressed most eloquently in that symbol of vulnerability and weakness—the cross of Jesus Christ. From that love, Paul wrote, nothing in all of creation can separate us, not even death.

When the government of South Africa cancelled a political rally against apartheid in the mid-1980's Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu moved the rally into St. George's Cathedral and turned it into a worship service. Soldiers and riot police followed and lined the walls of the cathedral with weapons and bayonets drawn. Tutu spoke about the evils of apartheid and how rulers who supported it were doomed to fail. Tutu is a small man physically but not spiritually. He pointed a frail finger at the soldiers and police—"You may be powerful, but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost."

It was a moment of unbelievable tension. Tutu came out from behind his pulpit and flashed his radiant smile. "Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side."

The crowd roared in approval and support. The police and soldiers put their weapons away and left the cathedral. Some stripped off their military gear, piled it on the altar, wept, and allied with the winning side.

Not many of us will find ourselves in that situation. But we do. All of us have our battles to fight. For some, the battle is pride, unwillingness to fail, which means unwillingness to trust the central truth of the good news of Jesus Christ: **"life springs from death"**

Last Sunday Pat and I, in the nursing home, were holding hands with Russell and Margaret ... Russell's has been a long, challenging struggle ... and certainly they both have experienced the helplessness and weakness of love but also the power of

love. When everything we count on for protection fails, the Divine Presence does not fail. Jesus' arms are still there—not promising to rescue, not promising to intervene, promising only to hold you no matter how far you fall”

Most of us know what our battles are about, the small wars we wage:

the daily struggle with the hurried, frantic busyness of our lives;

our captivity to our possessions;

slavery to success and winning at all costs.

Some battle crushing poverty,

and some contend with overwhelming affluence.

Some battle addiction.

Some battle demons of self-doubt and guilt;

some battle memories of broken relationships;

some battle depression.

And some are in a life-and-death struggle with disease, mustering the courage to get out of bed and go for another round of radiation or dialysis at 7:00 a.m. and do battle yet another day.

We can't, most of us can't, choose our particular circumstances in life.

But we can choose how to live,
what resources to employ,
which arsenal to engage.

We can choose to trust and lean on and hold as tightly as we can to the love of God in Jesus Christ, who invites us to be part of a victory which he has **already won.**

“Onward, Christian Soldiers” isn't in the hymnal any longer, and that, I believe, is ok. That hymn gets us moving in the wrong direction, A direction from which it's very difficult to return. It unleashes passions that are very difficult, if not impossible to reign-in. A better choice is to sing, “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us, Much We Need Thy Tender Care.” Or “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” Or, “There's a Wideness in God's Mercy that is Wider than the Sea.”

Let us pray:

You know, O God, our struggles, the battles we fight.

You know our deepest needs.

So we ask you for courage to fight the good fight, but also for faith to use your gifts of truth and mercy and goodness and peace. And we ask you to give us the faith to grow our strength from your strength – strength to strength -- and to trust you with our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.