

Why we still need the Armor of God

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When we read the Armor of God passage from Ephesians at Pastoral Care this week the group around the table looked at me and said, "There is so much in this passage, are you going to unpack this for us on Sunday."

Well I will try to unpack at least some of this. The challenge is this passage contains a world-view that we do not often encounter in the Episcopal Church. The concept of spiritual warfare, the devil, demons and assaults from the dark side sound more like something from Star Wars to our modern ears. This passage was used by the Manicheans as a basis for their theology. They were a splinter group that Augustine was a member of before he converted to orthodox Christianity. Much of the theology of Star Wars does in fact come from that group.

Context as always is the key to understanding this passage and from understanding comes an important application for today we too need the armor of God. This passage is the conclusion of a long letter to the church in the areas around Ephesus. There is no actual mention of Ephesus in the letter and many think this was sent around to various churches in that part of that part of the world that is now Greece. The identification with Ephesus may be that the letter ended its journey in with the community in Ephesus. What is important first of all is that this is a letter addressing concerns to a large number of churches in a large area. Of less importance but of interest is that there is considerable dispute as to whether Paul actually wrote this letter or if in fact he had already been executed and the writer is one of his followers.

We do know that Christians at the time of the letter were a small group in a pagan world. They lived in a very counter cultural way and were constantly under assault by the world at large.

The imagery comes from the OT and the readers of his letter would recognize it. There are several passages especially in Isaiah that the Jewish readers would have heard before, so the idea of using God for protection would have been familiar.

Paul is dealing with three issues in this letter: mission to the Gentiles and the reconciliation of Gentile and Jew, victory of the church over the powers that fight against it, and how people are to live out their life in accordance with Christ's teaching. This last concern is what our passage today is addressing. So that is the context of this passage.

Today most people do not believe any of this stuff, right? Well not so fast. First of all this passage and passages like this are at the heart of a major part of the theology of the Pentecostal movement that began in the early 1900s. By the way we use the terms,

Pentecostal, Fundamentalist and Conservative as if they are interchangeable and that is not true. Pentecostals are very much into the world of the Holy Spirit. This life is all about the great spiritual struggle for our souls and what is truly important is that one attains salvation for the afterlife. All the pain and struggle here on earth is all worth it when we die and take our place in heaven. What is also important to understand that a large part of the American population has this as a prominent part of their theology and it does effect the voting patterns and politics of this nation

I posted on our St. Aidan's Facebook page a link to a website that sells Armor of God PJs. If you don't believe me, just Google armor of God PJ and you will see the site. These pjs are made by a woman who read this passage to her children every night. Now what effect this will ultimately have on these young minds I'm not sure, but she is absolutely sincere.

This however is not just in the Pentecostal world. The Vatican's recently banned all Reike treatments at RC facilities. The reason given was that the Magisterium does not know what spirits are being called in. Now as someone married to a Reike practitioner who was trained by a Roman Catholic nun I can tell you they know the Holy Spirit is the source of that healing, but that is another rant.

I know a Lutheran pastor in Cleveland who is the person they call in when they need an exorcism and that is a position in the Roman Catholic Church. Many dioceses have such a person on staff or that they can call.

Now I suspect some of you are thinking surely we do not believe in this stuff right? Well, a person who was a member St. David's in Ashburn asked that exact question of me. I was a seminarian there and the rector had charged me with starting a healing ministry. Our new healing group was attending a training session led by the McNutts who are well known healing ministers. Everything was ok until we got to the late afternoon session and the McNutts began talking about deliverance ministry. The woman sitting next to me poked me in the arm and handed me a note that said, "We don't believe this do we?" Well I had her turn to the Baptism service and read the first three renunciations. Take a moment and turn to page 302.

Question Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Answer I renounce them.

Question Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Answer I renounce them.

Hmm well this is a little inconvenient isn't it? How many of you have ever read the service of Compline? Turn to page 132 and 133 and look at these prayers.

Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith. *1 Peter 5:8-9a*

Visit this place, O Lord, and drive far from it all snares of the enemy; let your holy angels dwell with us to preserve us in peace; and let your blessing be upon us always; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

So you see this is in our theology as well. I turn for a moment to a well known Anglican writer. C.S. Lewis in the Screwtape letters wrote "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They (the demons) themselves are equally pleased by both errors." He also wrote that the devil's greatest victory is that nobody believes in him any longer.

Hopefully I have not scared the daylights out of you and hope you do not think your rector has gone off the deep end, but I do agree with C.S. Lewis about this issue. I cannot rationally explain what I have experienced, but like anyone who has been involved in healing ministries I have experienced what can only be described as evil on at least three occasions. I can tell you that I was very glad at those moments that I had the armor of God to put on for protection.

Once again I want to turn to Eugene Peterson and his Message Bible for help in putting this in a more modern context.

"And that about wraps it up. God is strong, and he wants you strong. So take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no afternoon athletic contest that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels. Be prepared. You're up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it's all over but the shouting you'll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an *indispensable* weapon.

In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other's spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out. And don't forget to pray for me. Pray that I'll know what to say and have the courage to say it at the right time, telling the mystery to one and all, the Message that I, jailbird preacher that I am, am responsible for getting out."

There is a discernment piece in all of this we dare not forget. Identifying the enemy is the challenge. In this again C.S. Lewis in his Screwtape letters encourages his young apprentice demon to drape his evil messages in a churchly disguise.

Ultimately the battle has been won, but not just yet. This passage contains an element of in the future and now that is as true 2000 years ago as it is today. Imagine that you see Paul surrounded by Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation, even though he is in chains. With that protection he is safe from true harm from those who hold him captive and attack

the message of Christ that he brings. He still has his words, the words and works of the Spirit that work to spread the gospel.

Why put on the armor? What is the armor designed for? Do we still need it? The answer is yes. We need it for protection in a world where preaching the gospel and spreading the word is still a dangerous business. Christ is still victorious, but the struggle is far from over. In fact one just has to look at the world to see that the battle continues.

But if you are truly worried, you can always buy your armor of God PJs if that helps.