

Proper 16, Year B
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St. Paul's, Nbpt, MA

On the shores of Lake Geneva, in Switzerland, not too far from where my mother-in-law's house is the Chateaux Chillon. It is a wonderful castle complete with mote, tower and dungeon. While we were there on vacation earlier this month, we took our kids to see it one Sunday afternoon, and Marco told them that he remembered going to it when he was a boy and that there were suits of armor in one of the rooms. We soon found that the armor had been moved from one of the grand banquet rooms where it had been when Marco was young, but we couldn't find anyone to tell us where it now was. This only energized the excitement of Marcella and Nicolas to find it, and that of course then became the focus of the rest of our castle visit. It turned out that the armor was in one of the last rooms we visited - 3 suits of fine, highly decorated and polished armor. And of course we have a picture of our two darlings standing in front of them - triumphant in having accomplished their quest.

As I look at that picture now, on the one hand I remember the fun and excitement of that Sunday afternoon. But then on the other, I realize that what we were so excited about seeing is really just primitive war

machinery. Somehow we have managed to romanticize it, but armor is what people wore and took into battle with them, to protect against the blows of their enemies, and to take their own offensive shots – breastplates and daggers, shields and swords, helmets and maces.

These implements of struggle and violence would have been much more than museum pieces at the time that the letter to Ephesians was written. They would have been in current use then. So the writer is using common parlance, not romanticized poetry, in urging the young community of faith at Ephesus to spiritually armor up. But we should notice that the pieces of armor that are to be reached for are only the defensive ones. The writer instructs:

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.

(Ephesians 6:14-17)

Arguably the sword can be an offensive weapon, but it can also be used in defense. And when it is imaged as the word of God, we can see it not as a

killing weapon, but as a life giving weapon – sometimes it flays us, but only for our ultimate healing.

These words come down to us in our scriptures because they carry a real spiritual power. They are not just appropriate to whatever the specific struggles were of that young church in Ephesus – they have spoken to faithful through many generations since. That is because the armor of God is not meant for any human squabble – it is not meant for us to use against one another. Rather as the author of Ephesians puts it:

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. (Ephesians 6:12)

Perhaps you and I can go for great stretches of time without being personally confronted by this sort of cosmic darkness, but when we do brush up against it we know it. I have sensed it twice this week myself. Once as I listened to the vehement spewing of misinformation by several people who were speaking to me about their opposition to the Health Care reform being proposed by the Obama Administration. Now don't get me wrong – I feel there is room for rational discussion and disagreement. But

what I was hearing was speech full of hate and rage that had not content at all about the real details of the proposed plan.

The second place I sensed cosmic darkness at work was in a news story I viewed via the internet about the civil unrest developing in El Salvador over the issue of tran-national mining companies who are extracting gold and other precious minerals from mines in Nothern El Salvador. Already several anti-mining activists have been attacked or murdered by other pro-mining Salvadorans. And the story said, the trans-national company involved in the mining could not be reached for comment.

As I thought and prayed about how to respond – about how to be armored with God’s full armor in those two situations that I feel called to be involved in, I came across a meditation on our Ephesians passage, in the most recent issue of Christian Century Magazine. It’s written by The Rev. Matt Fitzgerald, Senior Minister of Wellesley Hills Congregational Church in Wellesley, MA. In meditation Fitzgerald describes a photo from a recent book on the civil rights movement, that spoke very strongly to him on these themes. This is how Fitzgerald describes that photo for us:

“A white man and a white woman are sitting with an African-American woman [at a Nashville lunch counter]. Their backs are turned on an angry mob gathered behind them. Their waiter has just poured a bottle of ketchup over the white man’s head. In the black and white photograph, the ketchup looks like blood as it drips down the man’s jacket. His jaw is clenched, his shoulders braced. He must want nothing more than to turn and attack the jeering crowd, to pick up a sword and wade into battle. But he sits still. On the world’s terms he is weak; armed with nothing but the gospel of peace he receives every sort of abuse. The difficult thing about Christian armor is that it lets more in than it keeps out.

The eyes of the crowd are insane, lit up by the cosmic powers of that dark time. One man has a sugar jar in his hand and a joyful smile on his face as he pours its contents over the African-American protester’s head. A middle-aged man above him looks on approvingly. But to their right, at the far edge of the photo’s boundary, there is a member of the mob who looks ashamed of this ugly scene. He is a young man with his eyes downcast, his face tormented. He appears to be in pain.

It seems obvious that the young man walked through the doors of that restaurant ready to attack, or at least to cheer on some violence. If one of the protesters had carried anything but God’s weapons, I imagine he would have fought back with pleasure. But his weapons proved no match for the armor of God; indeed, the photo caught the precise instant when some part of him was killed – not just slain in the spirit but slain by the Spirit, splayed wide open by the power of love. I doubt that those three protesters felt triumphant when they returned to their living quarters to shower and wash off the day’s trauma. More often than not, God’s victories emerge years later. They are difficult in the moment, and beautiful

only in retrospect. But there is great beauty in that photo. The armor of God is shining brightly. Though the flaming arrows rage, grace will win. As Ephesians promises, it always does.”(Matt Fitzgerald, Christian Century, August 11, 2009, p. 21)

My prayer for us is that we will each allow ourselves to be clothed by God in such armor, and then to stand and serve as grace’s healing reach into places where cosmic darkness lingers. In the name of Christ Jesus.

Amen+