

## Ephesians 6:10-20

### **Standing Firm**

Onward, Christian soldiers! marching as to war,  
with the cross of Jesus going on before.

The words for this hymn were penned in 1865 in England and have been a favourite hymn for many over the decades. Personally, I have always struggled with the words, maybe because I have a vivid imagination, and maybe because I tend to be a more passive person and these words remind me of the many times Christianity has gone on the offensive. Christianity as we well know has often found itself a close partner with governments since Constantine made it the official religion of the Roman Empire in the year 313.

This hymn was written when England was busy colonizing and Canada was among those countries. Though colonization was a political agenda it always seems to include a component of bringing Christianity to whatever country the British Empire was busy bringing under its rule and influence, which in and of itself is not the terrible part. Learning about God's love and compassion for people is a gift. Still, in many places, how that faith was imparted was more battle like than the grace it is supposed to be.

One cannot talk about these things in our climate in Canada right now without acknowledging the truth that churches were involved in residential schools and that the loving presence of Christian community and leaders was not always the example and experience of Indigenous people. Partnering with the government whose agenda was to "kill the Indian in the child" meant the church was on the offensive in teaching about Christianity.

Sadly, the church has often been on the offensive when it comes to standing firm in our faith, taking that to mean a literal call to arms, like the battle speech of a General before the troops. A passage such as Ephesians 6 can play into that thinking. Yet this scripture is not so much about being on the offensive as it is about being on the defensive using the spiritual armour of God. Truth, righteousness – which is living in right relationship with God – a readiness to proclaim the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God as we know it in scripture, are all part of helping us stand firm in our faith and as Christian community. What we are standing firm against are powers and authorities that would want to diminish our ability to worship and work in and as a faithful community of God who lovingly and compassionately care for people and all creation as beloved by God.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians assigns each of these qualities...faith, truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God, to the armour

of a soldier ready to defend their government, nation, or leader. In a time of Roman occupation seeing a soldier would be common place and a ready illustration for a teacher. For most of us it seems a drastic example. Yet when one considers the number of nations that have been or are at war in our lived experience, or even the recent example of the storming of Capitol Hill in the U.S. just a few short months ago, one comes to realize that many people around the globe could easily see some parallels.

Taking the whole of Ephesians into consideration when determining what is being taught by this illustration of a soldier standing at the ready, we may do well to remember that to be Christian was counter cultural, which is very much what it means to be Christian in Canada today. Christians were a small minority and their understanding of one God, one faith, one Lord, and baptism, went completely against the belief in the many gods of the Roman and Greeks. This group of Christians were called to go beyond their comfort zones and their disagreements and find ways to love one another and tear down dividing walls...not in conflict but in the way of peace. As verse 15 says, "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace."

The letter is not so much about conquering the world in the name of Jesus as it is about being able to stand firm and confident in one's faith against those who would want to separate people of faith from one another or from the love and saving grace of God. We are not to be shy and self-conscious in sharing the life-giving truth that is available to all people but confident in our ability to share the words of life that we have experienced through our reading of scripture, being in community with other Christians, and our willingness to step out in faith to love and care for others with compassion and grace.

Our amour is that of the Holy Spirit given by God to strengthen and uphold us. It is not a "bring the gospel at all costs" kind of faith. Ours is a faith whose greatest weapon is prayer. It is why the request to "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication." Supplication meaning our prayers for others. As it says, "To that end keep alert and always persevere in the supplication for all the saints." Supplication, the instruction to prayer for others, hold others in prayer, is stated twice. If someone says they are praying for you, or if you request prayer, know that it is one of the most powerful and effective tools we have for touching, changing, guiding, and loving people into wholeness and standing firm in our faith.

It is interesting that the one who is writing and talking about this amour of God is himself an ambassador in chains. This is not someone in a powerful position and yet he asks for prayers that he may declare boldly the mystery of the gospel, which is the saving, loving grace of God that we have in Christ. Remember that Christ died on a cross, not because he took up arms against the rulers and authorities, but because his words and actions threatened those in authority. His words were life-giving, proclaiming freedom and forgiveness, grace, and love.

This is our calling, to stand firm in our faith together in the community of the church, knowing that the world and what we experience in the world some would call evil, whether cosmic or because of human interaction through those who oppress and destroy. Our standing firm, our putting on of the whole armour of God, is to enable us to withstand that which would threaten to take away our faith and our hope, or that which would try to convince us that it promises life.

Think on the many distractions that sap the goodness and energy from our lives, from addictions to drugs and pornography, to making money or spending money. Think of the ways in which how we relate to our neighbour, family member, or co-worker frustrates us or makes us downright angry. Recall the ways you have reacted with hurtful words or actions, regarded another person or group of people as stupid because they disagree with your opinion. All of these are ways that evil or the “wiles of the devil” as found in this scripture reading, all of these ways are things that we are called to stand firm against. It is not just about the big things, it is about the everyday ways we are consumed, tempted, or act in ways that allow evil to wreak havoc in our lives or the lives of others, Christian or otherwise.

We are to stand firm in our understanding of God’s love for us, the work of Christ on the cross, and in prayer so that our lives declare boldly that God’s love, forgiveness, and grace is available to anyone who desires it. If we do not stand firm and share that transforming message with the world then others may miss out on what brings may bring wholeness and life to their living. So do not apologize for being a Christian, but with your prayers, and the prayers of all the Christian community, boldly speak the truth of God’s love, live in right relationship with God and others, proclaim the gospel of peace, knowing that your faith, the working out of our lives in God and the scriptures, all this armour is there to uphold and strengthen you and all of us together, through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.