

Ephesians 6:10-20

God is Strong

When I was raising my children, I spent a number of summers leading Vacation Bible School. For a week every summer I was immersed in helping children find fun and creative ways to learn about God's love for them, about Jesus' life, death, and rising that makes a difference for us, and how the Holy Spirit is at work in them and the world. Some passages of scripture were much easier to work with than others. Galatians 5, where it speaks about the fruit of the Spirit was always fun as everyone understands fruit. Images, pictures, songs, and food were easy to get one's hands on.

This scripture about the amour of God was also a nice one. Wonderful concrete items to help in teaching. And what child has not played pretend sword fighting with a stick or the paper tube available once the wrapping paper was all used up. How about a newspaper sword? Even as I say this though, I realize that children don't see many newspapers anymore and even the tube from the wrapping paper is harder to come by since many people use bags for wrapping.

Many of the images of a soldier that we have would now come from tv or movies. My mind immediately jumps to the Star Wars franchise with its light sabers, and whatever else. For the Christians in Ephesus the image of a soldier would have been that of a Roman soldier or guard. In the New Revised International Version of the Bible, or abbreviated as NRSV, the readers are given the image of a soldier with a belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet and sword. Paul, himself a prisoner at the time, uses these items to bring a comparison between how the Empire, Roman Empire in particular, uses these things for fear and to maintain power as compared to what God's power looks like.

It is interesting to note that all the pieces, save for the sword, are items for defense, for protection. And when Paul does write about the sword it is the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Nowhere in this passage does Paul advocate for using force, war, or brute strength to change people or the world. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson does not separate each piece of amour but rather says, "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."

All this talk about soldiers and weapons is really to say that we are to pick up the spiritual things that God provides for us in order that we might live transformed lives in this world regardless of the fact that things are pretty messed up. We know that wars are not a thing of the past but are always being raged somewhere around the globe. Even in Canada and in our own city, police officers need to go out each day with a bullet

proof vest and other protections because things are not safe. The world is not safe and this is not just about our physical safety but about our spiritual, emotional, even social safety.

The Message says, "This is no weekend war 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." Now I will be the first to admit that though I have taught this passage to children I really have struggled with it. And as I was pondering what I would say today about these words I had to consider what I thought about what many call spiritual warfare. For me much of what we fight on a day-to-day basis is our own greed, sloth, procrastination, selfishness, poor decisions making and that of others. We fight the power that others want to have over us, but rarely do I consider any cosmic battle going on. And then I wonder whether or not that makes me a poor Christian who just doesn't get it or is too grounded in the world to think of otherworldly things.

As soon as I see words like "Devil and all his angels" or as the NRSV says, "against the cosmic power of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places", well, I kind of tune out. One might ask how I can be a Christian and question things, but it turns out God works with me anyway, and that I do know for sure. I may question and have a difficult time with scripture but the work of the Holy Spirit has proven itself over and over again...and that is when I kind of had a moment of revelation. If I can believe in the Holy Spirit and trust that Jesus was raised from the dead, then maybe there is some other cosmic battle of power that is going on that I just don't want to consider.

Now I will tell you right here that I don't have any great answer or more of a revelation than that. What I do know is that I need to consider what all this means because I do believe in God. I do believe in the work of the Holy Spirit, and I do believe that somehow God's Son Jesus Christ, his living, dying, and rising makes a difference not only in my life, but has made a difference for millions of lives around the globe over centuries. There is a power here that has proven itself for millennia. I know God is strong. God has been strong for me. God has been strong for others, and God want each of us to be strong. This strength is not brute strength but powerful strength that comes from trusting that God's got this, whatever the outcome we are not on our own because it turns out that we are up against far more than we can handle on our own.

It might be our own darkness and addictions or that of someone else. It might be facing the unknowns of illness and death, it might be governments, businesses, or just another human being making decisions about what is best for their power and prestige rather than what it means for each person to have dignity and value. It might very well be a cosmic battle for our lives that I just don't understand. What is sure is that God is strong and God is there to help so that we when all is said and done, we are still standing.

Regardless of how all of this lands for you it turns out that truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. They are weapons, weapons that don't

destroy another, rather these weapons build others up and the words that sustain us are the words of scripture which, as I just shared can trip us up, make us struggle, but even if we don't understand it all, it is an indispensable weapon meant to give us life, lead us into transformed lives of grace and not only us but given as a gift to the world.

It is saddening and even maddening that scripture has so often been used as an excuse for violence when the New Testament particularly is focused on love. Militant Christianity continues to be with us. It did not go away with the Crusades or political unrest between Catholics and Protestant in Ireland years ago. We see it in the news everyday especially in the US right now, but it also reared its ugly head in Canada during Covid and those attitudes also linger.

God's word is an indispensable weapon but it is in the same way that prayer is essential. We are to pray hard and long. We are to pray for our siblings in Christ, and we are to pray for others, because truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words, and those things are for all people. God is strong and wants every created being to be strong so that we all know God's love and protection. Through prayer we are to keep each other's spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out. This is about building each other up in love, not attacking people.

And going back to that cosmic struggle that is going on and my own questions. I believe in the power of prayer, and prayer does not only happen when you sit yourself down to spend time with God, as important as that daily building of relationship with God is. Prayer can happen anytime and anywhere. In the NRSV it says, "pray in the Spirit at all times". I take this to mean that we are to live our lives as a prayer, trusting that God is strong and wants us strong. Prayer is our conversation, our relationship building with God. In Philippians 4:4-8 Paul writes, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—**think** about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

I take this to mean a number of things, but put together with this passage from Ephesians it is about living out our lives as prayer where we think on things that bring meaning, wholeness, and transformation to our lives, that of our families, communities and maybe, just maybe through all of us to the world. God is that strong and able to take whatever the fight is, whatever the war is, and wherever it is and do it in such a way that in Christ we will find ourselves still on our feet.

Whatever you are struggling with, be it something personal or bigger, whether it be with your family or your faith, whether it be beyond your scope of influence or not, trust that God is strong and wants you strong. God's got this. Even when it seems that dark forces are taking the battle, God's already won the war. God is strong.

I share this message with you in the hope that it brings your strength in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.