

“The Call to Struggle”
August 22, 2021
Scripture: Ephesians 6:10-20

A few years ago, in 2018, I participated in leading a worship service held in the Episcopal cathedral downtown to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. I was eager to be a part of the service and looked forward to the reading I’d be given, but was crestfallen to be assigned this passage from Ephesians. When I first read it, which I had done many times over the years, I couldn’t understand why this would be included in a service commemorating Dr. King.

I’ve always had trouble getting beyond the imagery of the “armor of God.” It’s always struck me as such a militant, violent image that I’ve never been able to take it seriously. I think it’s very appealing to people, though. There are all sorts of references to it in literature and art. We love to imagine ourselves wearing a suit of armor, wielding a sword, beating back evil. The trouble with it, for me, has been the impression that it elevates violence as the right response to the threat of evil in the world. And even though I know it’s intended metaphorically, that truth, righteousness, peace, faith and salvation are to be our protection *as if* they were armor, all I ever see depicted are these instruments of war. All I can hear is “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” full of triumphalism and exclusion.

And I know many people like that imagery (and that hymn; honestly, it’s been rattling around in my brain all week!). And many love the idea of a forceful, muscular, aggressive faith, but it’s been misappropriated and abused so many times throughout history I really had trouble seeing how this passage could be redeemed. Rather than declining to read it, though, I decided to trust the folks who had assigned it to me and try to look deeper at these words. And something jumped out at me that I’d never considered before.

The writer of Ephesians tells them: “For 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.” For that writer, in that time, those forces were understood to be actual entities that existed beyond the sky. Ancient writers shared a worldview that understood the universe consisting of heaven and earth where every institution or nation on earth had a parallel or representative angel in heaven. So, for instance, when nations went to war against each other on earth, the angels of those nations battled one another in the heavens. The point is ancient people believed that every material reality was connected to a spiritual one.

With the help of a book by New Testament scholar Walter Wink titled *The Powers That Be*, I’ve come to understand how that ancient worldview can have relevance today. Wink points out that human societies have organized themselves around only a handful of different worldviews historically. There’s this one assumed by the New Testament authors where the spiritual and material are balanced and have a mutual, parallel existence. Another that developed a century or so after the New Testament period is what he calls “Spiritualist.” It’s the belief that only the spiritual realm has value and the material realm is utterly corrupt and should be rejected.

A third worldview that developed much later is just the opposite, “Materialist.” It claims only the material world, what we can observe through our senses and measure, is real and anything spiritual is delusion. That worldview is still very influential and the Church’s response to it has been what Wink calls the “Theological” worldview. That understanding insists on a strict separation between the spiritual and material. In other words, science and theology don’t contradict each other because they have nothing to do with one another. They simply coexist. Finally, there is emerging a worldview Wink calls the “Integral” worldview.

An integral worldview says the material world in which we all live and move is infused with the spiritual. That may sound familiar to some of us here because the integral worldview lies at the heart of Celtic spirituality, and it has ancient roots. If you’ve ever seen some of the standing crosses in Ireland or seen relics from pre-Christian Ireland, as well as some of the symbolism of Hinduism and Buddhism, you may have noticed a spiral shape in various places. Walter Wink uses the spiral to represent the integral worldview; as opposed separate spheres of material and spiritual, sometimes interacting, sometimes one or the other invalidated, sometimes completely separate. In the spiral the material and spiritual worlds are integrated and inextricable. Another modern way to represent it is the Moebius strip: an oblong strip that’s twisted so that when you begin running your finger along it on the outside you always end up on the inside, and it’s not clear where one ends and the other begins.

That worldview, one that says the material world is bound up with and infused by the spiritual, has given me a lens through which I can understand these words in Ephesians and see why they’d be used to commemorate Dr. King. King understood that the flesh and blood manifestations of racism are not our true enemy. Our true enemy, what he struggled against and we’re called to struggle against, are the forces of white supremacy and toxic nationalism and hyper-individualism that give rise to policies and behaviors that are harmful to vulnerable people.

In other words, it’s not enough just to pass legislation like the Voting Rights Act if we don’t also struggle against the cosmic power of white supremacy and belief in a hierarchy of human value. The blood and flesh practice of detaining or expelling undocumented immigrants who are seeking asylum is just one expression of the deeper xenophobia and nativism that motivates such actions. We’re called to struggle against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of hatred and fear that plunge us into darkness and infect our lives and spirits.

To engage that struggle we need certain qualities at our disposal. We need a sense of salvation, covering us like a helmet, that the destiny of creation is already assured so we have nothing to fear when we risk our lives for the sake of God’s kingdom. We need the power of truth to surround us like a belt so we can call out the forces of evil at work so voter suppression isn’t called “election security” or a violent insurrection called a “peaceful protest.” And we need to wear our faith like a breastplate, much as Dr. King did when he told an audience in Memphis, Tennessee the night before he was shot, “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land.”

These are the qualities we need to struggle against the enemy we face. An enemy we can find at work in the world around us and at work within us to undermine our resolve and convince us none of it matters. We are called to struggle against those voices who give substance to the cosmic powers of darkness in our world, who preach fear and hatred and exclusion. With this “armor of God” to protect us, we can raise our voices on behalf of the vulnerable and reach out with compassion to embrace the despised and reveal a world where the rulers and authorities and cosmic powers of darkness are vanquished and God’s hope for us all is realized.

It’s a struggle we cannot avoid if we’re to be true to the God who calls us and redeems us and empowers us in Christ. We cannot stay silent or passive. It’s time to put on our armor, to surround ourselves with the presence of God, to declare it boldly, for we must speak.

Amen