

WHEN LIFE IS A STRUGGLE

Ephesians 6:10-20

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23 August 2015

There are people who love art museums, and there are people who think they're boring. If you are a person who loves them and you want to entice someone who's reluctant to go with you, the Cleveland Museum of Art is your go-to place. Take your non-art-loving friend to see the new atrium - it's jaw-dropping gorgeous, and it's impossible not to be impressed with the way the architects blended the old part of the building with the new. If your friend is a techie, there's a room with nothing but interactive screens that display images of over 4,000 works of art and help you design your own art tour. If your friend is still not impressed, then take them to every child's favorite part of the museum - the armor court. It's filled with 300 years worth of weapons, helmets, and armor, including a life-sized model of a man and horse both decked out in full gear.

I think of that room when I read this passage from Ephesians, full of military imagery, words like armor, battle and shield. It was this passage that inspired the old hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers" which most churches no longer sing because it seemed to glorify war, and it felt out of place to people who are accustomed to coming to church to experience, and pray for peace. We no longer sing, "Onward Christian Soldiers" but we still have this passage. Should it be relegated to the back of the scripture drawer, one of those passages we no longer read because its language seems so dated that its message is no longer useful? Or is there something worthwhile here?

Like much of the Bible, the language in this passage is metaphorical, symbolic, and very directly so. Take on the "armor of God," which of course is not armor made of

metal, but values, character traits which will help us face the struggles of life: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God. We're not talking about the kinds of wars that armies fight, then, but about other kinds of battles.

And we do face them, don't we? I hear about them in emails and phone calls I receive, in meetings in my office, and I hear about them in everyday conversation, as I'm sure you do too. We hear people talk about their battle with cancer. A friend calls and says she's fighting to save her marriage. Parents say that they are struggling to save their son's life; they feel he's slipping away after too many bad decisions. A relative battles depression every day. A coworker talks about the fight to maintain sobriety. We battle mental and physical illness, bad habits like laziness, addictions of all type and degree. Life can be a struggle. This language from Ephesians, as odd as it might sound at first, honors the reality of those struggles. Language like this helps us take these battles seriously. Instead of saying, "Oh, I should be stronger" or "other people have it worse than I do" maybe it would be productive to name a struggle for what it is.

For what does an army do when they know they are facing a formidable enemy? First of all, they prepare, far in advance. Even in relative peaceful times, nations prepare soldiers. They have organized and trained troops, they have leaders and armaments, transportation and strategies and back-up plans. Sometimes these so-called "peacekeeping" troops actually help stave off attack. But it's also true that the military is prepared even before problems arise, so that when the time comes, they're ready at a moment's notice.

When the struggles require spiritual resources, we prepare ahead of time by nurturing faith. The person who already knows something about how to pray, who is ac-

quainted with scripture, who has a faith that has been tested, who has a support system of other people in the church - she is a person who is better-equipped for the struggle of cancer or depression or divorce or job loss or grief than the person without such preparation.

One of the reasons we have Stephen Ministers on call each week is that sometimes someone who hasn't been to church in a long time will come back during a problematic period of life. We have people trained and prepared to help in those times — call them our spiritual reserves.

As the school year begins, and students are starting college, Nate and I talk about “our kids”, especially those who are freshmen. We hope that the spiritual foundations they've received here will support them in the inevitable challenges of that new experience. The more they have received and learned, the better prepared they will be, and part of that learning is the wisdom of when to ask for help.

Not all of life's struggles are personal. Aren't we fighting against hatred and racism? There is still a war on poverty. We're struggling against oppression, materialism, and greed. We're fighting for freedom, for the rights of those who have the least, for a world free of terrorism and fear. We're battling injustice. We need armies of people for all of these struggles; we need one another. Perhaps this militaristic language helps us to see these struggles for what they are. Who are our leaders in these various campaigns? What songs do we need to sing as we march together? Do we have practical, well-thought-out strategies? Do these efforts have adequate funding?

We don't use these kinds of words often in church. They're not particularly comfortable words for me. But then again, the armor court is not my favorite part of the mu-

seum. But these words challenge me to take seriously the presence of evil, another word that doesn't come easily to my lips.

You don't have to believe in a devil with a pitchfork to believe in the presence of evil. If you've been to a concentration camp, you'll believe in evil. If you've seen a man shoot people who are in their church for Bible Study, you'll believe in evil. The ability of humans to be cruel to other humans shows us the existence of evil.

The United Methodist pastor Will Willimon was once a guest lecturer in a church in Texas. After his talk, there was a question and answer period and the host pastor was rather critical. He said to Willimon, "You seem to have such a negative view of the world. I believe that the world is a place of God's love..."

Willimon then suggested that the pastor leave the doors unlocked and church burglar alarm turned off to see how nice the world really is.

Putting on the armor of God means that we take seriously the existence of evil, even though our strategies may cause us to look very different from others. During World War II, many people were saved through the cleverness of the people in the Resistance movement. People were hidden, sometimes in plain sight, and smuggled, and names were changed.

During the Civil Rights movement, tactics of nonviolence won the day even though the other side had dogs and sticks, white robes and ropes used for lynching. This is a photo of one of the lunch counter sit-ins in Nashville. A white man and a white woman are sitting with an African-American woman. 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 this 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. But the armor of God he is wearing is shining brightly.

In the story of David and Goliath, the young future king of Israel gives away his battle secret. He says to Goliath, who towers over him, "You come to me with a sword and spear. I come armed with faith so that you will know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear." Faith is the greatest weapon there is. It prepares and equips us to face the challenges of our personal lives and to battle the injustices of our day.

Jesus knew that his life would include struggles against the forces of evil. Before he began his ministry, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. He fasted and he prayed and then he faced temptation. The gospel writers say that he was tempted by Satan. The temptations were for him to be something other than who he was, to do magical tricks, to be impressive, to draw huge audiences. Jesus faced each temptation by quoting scripture. He stayed true to himself and to who God called him to be and what God called him to do. And then, after those 40 days and those successful battles, he was prepared for his life's calling.

On Thursday, former president Jimmy Carter talked about his battle with cancer. [55]He said, with complete confidence and believability, "I'm perfectly at ease with whatever comes. I do have a deep religious faith, which I'm very grateful for." He has put on

the armor of God. How did he do it? Well, at this moment, he's teaching Sunday School, something he's done almost every Sunday for decades - when he's not building houses around the world with Habitat for Humanity or promoting peace in other ways. I can't think of anyone I admire more...he has put on the armor of God, practicing his faith daily, making a difference for good in the world.

As we start this new program year in our church, we're offering Bible Study, opportunities to teach, CrossTraining, prayer groups, retreats, all kinds of ways to grow in our faith — a kind of basic training if you will, for the inevitable struggles of our lives and of our day.

Let us pray. Help us, God, to prepare ourselves well so that when we face challenges and difficulties, we will be strong and courageous, and may we be bold enough to look injustice and hatred in the eye and not back down until the world changes for the better. Amen.

