

Sermon for August 25, 2024
Highland Presbyterian Church
Sermon texts: Ephesians 6:10-20 and Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18
Sermon by: Rev. Adrian White

I went on a cleaning blitz. You killed it at work today. HPC is the bomb. We need boots on the ground. She's leading the charge, but they're the one who calls the shots. He went totally nuclear in that meeting.

Any of these common idioms individually wouldn't attract notice. But when I string them together, doesn't it start to feel...a bit macabre, perhaps? Our everyday language is saturated with violence. The lexicon of death and war permeates our most mundane conversations. And it's not just our words of course, but our world. And not just our world today, but through all of recorded history. Language reflects reality, and language shapes reality too.

When we look at today's scripture from the letter to the Ephesians, we find a text densely packed with the imagery of war, written when early Christians were facing ongoing political violence and repression. "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil," writes the author, who then goes on to describe in detail what that armor shall be: A belt of truth, a breastplate of righteousness, a shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, "the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God."

This text casts quite an evocative image. At 2000 years removed, we might envision a kind of knight in shining armor, flaming cross emblazoned across the chest, jaw set in resolve amidst the pursuit of noble victory, decked out and ready to slay the forces of evil. But in the context of the early church, the picture in our minds eye looks less like a faithful follower of Jesus and more like a Roman Centurion, one of those military leaders who helped carry out Rome's brutal occupation of historic Palestine which crushed the Jewish people and early Christians under intolerable social and economic conditions.

We have in scripture this gift of an evocative metaphor from Paul or perhaps, as most scholars believe, Paul's devoted student writing in his name. The challenge with a metaphor, though, is that when stripped of its context, you can make it mean any number of things. This passage has been leveraged across Christian history to support so-called holy war, crusades, executions of heretics, violent anti-semitism, and more. It has, in our vitriolic political era, been used to cast "the other" as a spiritual foe in need of vanquishing. When I heard this passage most recently, it was

in the context of Christian Nationalist extremists waging a spiritual war against LGBTQ+ people and people who seek abortion care — and exercising that war through legislation that restricts individual autonomy and physically harms families. There are, in that movement, those who are also preparing for a violent revolution with scripture as their sword and shield.

And it's not just this passage that gets held up in this way. When we look at the whole of our sacred texts, they include numerous stories that glorify God in the form of bloody victories in battle, vanquishing of God's enemies, and conquests of whole people groups, including our first reading.

Joshua 24 starts and ends with passionate and beautiful words calling on the people to glorify and worship only Yahweh, the God who protected them and delivered them from slavery to the promised land. But in between, the text recounts all of the peoples whom God enabled the Israelites to clear away from that land by violent force and destruction. Perhaps in this writing, the Israelites, like the early Christians, were trying to make meaning and hold onto faith in a world where violence is the norm and perceived as necessary in order to have power, to be safe, to feel secure.

On the other hand, Ephesians chapter 6 has also been interpreted and held up to fervently promote principled pacifism. We can hold up the Ephesians text next to passages that teach us about God's peace - Remember in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus rebukes Peter for taking up a sword against one of Jesus's captors. "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus says to Peter, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword." Surely, then, the sword of the Spirit is something other than a sharpened blade.

And we can take another look at the text itself. Those who know it well might have noticed that I skipped one of the articles that the writer calls us to wear as we stand with Christ: our shoes. "Lace up your sandals in preparation for the gospel of peace." It's the only part of the armor that's not described in metaphor. "Lace up your sandals" and get to walking, telling people gospel — good news — no matter how determined the forces of evil may be in crushing your faith in Christ's reign of peace.

The simplicity and clarity of lacing my own shoes feels like an attainable and essential starting point when I read Ephesians and imagine clothing myself in such a way that I might be able to boldly follow the Prince of Peace while staying safe from evil. It reminds me that I am to be a messenger, not a soldier. Just as earlier I recalled instances of Christians using scripture to justify violence, I think of

Christians throughout history who practiced deliberate, principled non-violence, from some of the earliest saints and martyrs to 20th century leaders like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

One such person who particularly inspires me is journalist and social activist Dorothy Day. As one of the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement, Day engaged in a life of voluntary poverty in order to dwell in the joys of true community and a life of faith. In many of the stories I've read about Day, she is described specifically as wearing worn, unassuming, second-hand shoes — that's what she laced up to do the work of peace.

Unlike some of the radicals she worked closely with, she detested the possibility of violent revolution and instead advocated urgently for a “revolution of the heart” which allows one to see Christ in others and love them as God does. Through all her life's work, it is evident that she understood that meaningful peace requires ensuring people have housing, clothing, food, and human connection. In her autobiography, Day reflects on one transformative moment in her ministry:

“We were just sitting there talking when the lines of people began to form, saying, “we need bread.” We could not say “Go, be thou filled.” If there were six small loaves and a few fishes, we had to divide them. There was always bread...there is always room for one more; each of us will have a little less...We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know [God] in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet too, even with a crust, where there is companionship.”

Day reminds me that peace is not just lofty diplomacy talks and reigning in the bloodlust of empire, though it is that. But it's also being with people and making sure they have what they need. She teaches me that it is better to have a little bit while we are together and at peace than to have power and luxury through violence and at the expense of others.

I am reminded of conversations I've been privileged to have recently with our pastoral staff, with Rev. Dr. Angela Johnson, pastor of our partner Grace Hope Presbyterian, and with the anti-racism team here at Highland. We've been exploring ways we might deepen our partnership, particularly to help meet the needs of people in Smoketown, Louisville's oldest historically Black neighborhood and home to Grace Hope. In these conversations, food keeps coming up. All the different ways of redistributing food so that everyone has what they need and there is less waste.

This conversation is just beginning to blossom into a plan, and we look forward to sharing more about ways that our Highland community can be involved.

The letter to the Ephesians is not a letter to one person, a lone soldier, armor gleaming in the sun to intimidate enemies. It's a letter to a community of Jesus's followers facing intimidation and violence. If we allow the peace of God to transform us, we will find that we already have what we need for the work that lies ahead. Because we have faith, and because we already have enough shoes to go around, then let us be messengers of the good news of peace.