

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

77th Week of Pandemic - Indoor Service

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

Pslam 34:15-22

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

08/22/2021

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

[Jesus said,] 56“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. 57Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. 58This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” 59He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. 60When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” 61But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. 65And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” 66Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. 67So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” 68Simon

Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Armor of God

Good morning! What are your earliest memories of the church? For a lot of people, it’s the music. This was true for me too, only beaten by my memories of standing FOREVER for what seemed like no apparent reason. The first hymn that I was able to say that I remembered, and that I liked, was Martin Luther’s *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. I doubt I’m the first Lutheran to say that, and I probably won’t be the last. As an impressionable young boy, the language of Jesus doing battle with Satan, of gearing up for battle, sounded, well... cool. The same was true for me and our second reading from Ephesians. (That’s right, as great as the bread and communion language is in our Gospel, we’re going with the second lesson again this week.) It’s a popular piece of scripture, our scripture from Ephesians. For the past several weeks we have been working through the Gospel of John and Ephesians, and today we arrive at what is basically the end of the letter to the church in Ephesus. Arriving at the finish, the writer chooses to go out with a bang: *“10Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. 11Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12For 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. 13Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”¹

One scholar writes “A theological reading of this text thus requires twenty-first-century preachers to think carefully about the metaphors of spiritual warfare.”² Clearly, no such thing was going through my mind as a young child. Like most children, church was boring. But armor? Battle? Swords?! That was basically a regular afternoon for my brother and I! But our scholar is right, so let’s unpack the text.

It can be tempting to take the battle imagery from our lesson and run with it, but we need to remember that the writer of Ephesians (maybe Paul, maybe not) isn’t advocating violence. In fact, until after 313 C.E., Christianity was solely a religion of non-violence. Haruko Nawata Ward writes that “no early Christian took up weapons against their persecutors, and many died as martyrs.”³ But war was more than a metaphor for anyone living in the Roman Empire. As I have said before, the propaganda of the *Pax Romana* was “peace” only in that everyone knew what would happen to them if they defied the empire. But notice that the battle waged

¹ Ephesians 6:10-17 NRSV

² Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year B, Volume 3*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 374.

³ *Ibid.* p. 376.

here is not only different, but waged on a vastly different scale. The fight is against something beyond what we can expect, not against each other. Think more like the movie *Constantine*, not *Avengers: Endgame*. Are you familiar with *Constantine*? It's a 2005 film starring Keanu Reeves that does a pretty good job of portraying the traditional view of spiritual battle.

Now, we can discuss the particulars of what spiritual warfare looks like at another time, but even I, as someone who traditionally approaches scripture from an academic perspective first, will admit that something beyond my understanding can take place. The point I want us to realize is that the fight spoken of here in Ephesians 6 isn't against each other. I know, it even says that; "*12For 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.*" Like a lot of things, we Christians often forget that. Throughout our 2,000 year run we have used scripture like this to justify all sorts of horrible acts. The Crusades come to mind, as does the genocide done by "missionaries" across the world to the native populations. And the justification doesn't stop there, we use scripture like this as we throw insults and attacks at fellow Christians too! From fights in the early church to the wars between Protestants and Catholics, we are all guilty. All of this behavior forgets two crucial things! First, this battle isn't physical! The weapons are metaphors, the sword of the Spirit doesn't really exist. Second, the battle isn't really waged by us at all! It's Jesus Christ who is doing the fighting. The very act of "arming" us is the battle that God wages.

Take a look at the weapons again, forgetting the metaphors. We are given truth, righteousness, a gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the Spirit, the word of God. Not very violent when you take a closer look, is it? God

fighters to equip us as a community, giving us the things we need to take part in God's creation.

Now here's the interesting part. While God is the one fighting, we are still called to action. We can't just sit around and do nothing; much like Colossians 3:14, we are called to actively participate in what God is doing. Look at the text again, we are called to "put on" armor, "fasten" our belt, "put on" the breastplate, "put on" our shoes, "take" up our shield, "take" our helmet and sword. These are words of action, not states of mind. Christianity isn't a way of life, it's a life lived out, actively doing what God calls us to do. And how do we do that? We come together, instead of fighting, we draw closer to each other, strengthening our community as we read scripture together, as we sing, as we break bread, and as we live out the Gospel by helping our neighbors. Like the letter says, this battle is against "cosmic powers" and "spiritual forces." That's above my pay grade. Leave that to God. In the meantime, we come together in faith, trusting that God can handle the rest. Amen.