

**RESISTANCE IN A CULTURE OF BLIND SELF-ABSORPTION; EPHESIANS 6:10-20;
AUGUST 23, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY,
WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Paul's naming the soldier's weapons of war is counter-intuitive for a religion that worships a prince of peace; and in our violent, terrorist-ridden world images of violence are off putting; but Paul wants to convey a larger message: people of faith, followers of Jesus *are at war*; there is a battle royal against the 'powers of darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places, cosmic powers, rulers, authorities.'

It would be easy to say that Paul was a product of his time and since his world was occupied by the greatest military force in history – the Roman Imperial army – he is merely reflecting the struggle of Christians in the first century against an oppressive regime.

No one would deny there was such a struggle. But that is not Paul's point. The war he is summoning God's people, you and me, to fight is not against a time-bound Roman regime; but a more formidable enemy: *spiritual forces*, the very seat of evil and darkness.

Indeed, any matter of consequence comes down to our *spiritual alignment*: money, vocation, marital health and well-being, sobriety, the will of a society for justice; just as the motives of those aligned with power for power's sake and greed are motivated by spiritual forces other than the One to which Paul calls for allegiance.

There is a strong pacifist tradition in the Christian faith; but even the historic peace churches – Quakers, Mennonites, and Amish – believers in non-violence, even these, would be hard-pressed to deny that Paul was rallying the troops for the 'battle of all time' between good and evil.

His bold use of armor to make his point says this is no sophomore debate about good and evil; nor a matter of striving to be better Christians on Sunday so we can go about our lives the rest of the week. No, his admonishing us to put on the whole armor of God: breastplate, helmet, belt and sword (today's night vision goggles, Kevlar vest, and M4 semi-automatic) this call to arms – serious, if metaphoric imagery – is to make clear that we are in for the fight of our lives.

This epic fight has been the inspiration of great literature from *Paradise Lost* and *The Divine Comedy* to *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*; not to mention the Bible itself.

Marilynne Robinson's *Lila* is another installment of her on-going series about the struggles inherent in choosing the life of faith – coming to a spiritual commitment to follow Jesus – just as would be the case in choosing to become an observant Jew or adherent of any great religion. The struggle involves a profound spiritual transformation but then must be sustained with vigilance against the temptations and lures of what Paul calls the cosmic powers.

No one has depicted this so well as C.S. Lewis in his beloved *Screwtape Letters* – the story of an underling demon who is on assignment from

his supervising devil-in-hell, Uncle Screwtape, to distract and reclaim a new convert to the faith to his old life of despair and depression. The epic battle to which Paul summons us starts at the personal level but quickly moves to the corporate realm. So strong is the connection between the life of the spirit and our capacity to fight the good fight that throughout history national leaders have convened days of prayer and fasting in preparation for the waging of war. Yet, such uses of religious faith and spiritual commitment are ill-conceived and represent the coopting of the life of the spirit by the very powers Paul would have us fight; in our time, radical Muslims, militant Jews and fundamentalist Christians are examples; even our Presidents who end their speeches with "God bless the United States of America" sometimes skate on the thin ice of invoking God's name for American patriotism and power.

Rather, St. Paul seeks to channel our faith and courage *against the very powers* that create chaos and destruction by equating patriotism or racial supremacy or male dominance or whatever the oppression du jour might be – with living a faithful life.

Let me recap; Christians believe there is and will be, in every generation, a war between good and evil. The biblical view says history moves forward, toward an end, not cyclically as eastern religions or at random and by chance as some scientific versions propose. The biblical view of history also anticipates an end of time just as there was a beginning and that at the end-time good will prevail; but not before a protracted and teetering struggle and the final victory of God's people and purposes.

No one can predict a timetable for this scenario though many have tried; just as other perspectives of the unfolding of history must remain in the realm of philosophic speculation and poetic imagination so must apocalyptic versions of the Christian faith. What is not speculative are the present forces opposed to dialogue, diplomacy, peace, equal opportunity, and human rights.

The powers of darkness are cunning. They dupe us into believing we are on the right side of the fight especially when our privilege and power, as men, as Caucasians, as Americans is threatened.

We have only to look as far back as the 1950s when the nation was attending and joining the church in droves, after WWII; the Presbyterian Church was fittingly dubbed 'the Republican Party at prayer.' But then the 1960s blew the lid off the established structures of authority and white male power.

The Vietnam War was challenged; the President was challenged; racial injustice was named; the rights of women were called for; human rights and at last the rights of sexual orientation were demanded and celebrated.

Many Christians and Jews were active in the liberation movements of the sixties. But until recently, with the wide-spread killing of unarmed black men by police officers, a season of quietude has prevailed. More conservative Christians were given the spotlight in the Regan Administration; they organized from the margins to the center of the political stage as movers and shakers. Their churches grew while progressive Christianity lost membership and influence. But a shift is

taking place; mainline, progressive Christians are putting on the whole armor of God again.

Let me bring these generalizations of the past into the specificity of the present, into our personal lives. While Paul is not calling for us to enlist in the military and request deployment he clearly envisions that we will be waging a great struggle against forces aligned against God's purposes, against his dream for Buffalo.

We might even go so far as to say, as a mentor of mine often did, that being involved in some fight, some battle, some conflict for the faith is the litmus test of authentic discipleship.

One wonders how it could be otherwise; how we could entertain any notion that practicing our faith bestows only blessing when the founder of our faith was executed as a criminal of the state. At some point, we will find the faith we profess and the Lord and Savior we serve in opposition to some cause or relationship or organization we are committed to. We will sense that following Jesus in such situations requires our recognizing a higher priority, asks of us to go against the grain, if not get ourselves into trouble.

Models for such a witness to faith are many; leaders of the social justice movements are obvious; they encountered injustice and so began their battle and life's work.

But most of us will not be starting social justice movements. Paul asks us to put on the armor of God because we are on the front lines – where evil splinters and fractures human relationships and sows the seeds of bigotry and bias. We are confronted in countless, untold and ordinary ways with routine violations of what is right: we are offered personal gain at someone else's expense through gossip or worse, we are tempted to inflate ourselves to seize some reward, we are faced with the choice to open the door of some group we belong to, to a person who dresses, thinks and acts differently than we do. Paul is rallying us today to join the troops of the faithful; to stand up for what is just and honorable.

Yet, we may have become so familiar with compromising our faith and principles that we no longer recognize the concessions we make or the extent to which we've been bought by the desire to fit, if not popular and materially rewarded.

Paul seeks to shake us out of our slumber, he talks about awakening from a deep sleep; coming out of our moral/ethical/spiritual lethargy to an acute awareness of those who suffer; to see and change the systems, structures and organizations we belong to that play a role in causing unjust hardship and distress.

Perhaps what we need is a 'Jon Stewart of the American church'; someone who will enable us to recognize, as Stewart helped the nation recognize, when it is being fed – let us say 'horse manure' – from the politicians and executives and from leaders of state and anyone trying to slip one by us or link our self-interest to theirs and continue to exploit others.

It takes a strong moral conscience and deep trust in a higher power to go against popular opinion, the received culture or the mind of the

herd. To tell them they cannot count on our vote or our silence or our willingness to 'go along.'

As Jon Stewart pointed out in his last show, there is a lot of 'horse manure' out there, shoveled our way by the presidential candidates hungry for power and privilege, by corporate conglomerates who tell us GMOs and micro-beads are good for us; by soft drink companies that say they're concerned about our health, and recommend more exercise and a refreshing sugar drink when we're finished.

It's out there. The banks that are too big to fail and willing to ignore the wrist slap of the last bail out and continue to push their risky ventures on the knowledge that the worst they'll face are settlements and fines for a few tens of millions of dollars.

The super rich who vacuum up the rewards of our hallmark American productivity and you could say the days of their workers lives along with the profits of the companies they own or buy and sell with little or no regard for the human cost. Or the children, especially the one in our nation who live in life-threatening poverty; or the students with insurmountable debt while college presidents, football and basketball coaches and university endowment portfolio managers walk away with celebrity paychecks.

We may or may not change those injustices; but we can rest assured that they are not part of God's purposes; and we can rest assured that God will raise up leaders to fight them; but any present or future leaders will need people who are no longer willing to be bought or turn a blind eye.

People are waking up in communities across the nation. Christians don't own this fight; the cosmic powers are interested in dominating far more than the Presbyterian Church or even Christianity itself. No, the appetite of the spiritual powers of darkness is unquenchable; it is for every religious and non-religious person on the face of the planet. It is for the death of every species; it is the terrorist goal of total chaos and destruction, it lobbies for the unchecked use of fossil fuels and the unstoppable melt-down of the planet.

I am not talking in hyperbole. If you think I am I fear you underestimate the cosmic powers and the ambition and goal of the spiritual forces in heavenly places.

AA has a poignant phrase; they refer to "stinking thinking"; Jon Stewart's term is, yes, 'bull shit' – it's time to wake up friends; we're wading in it; there are regions of this city and nation, not to mention the world that are living on borrowed time.

Paul asks of us today to put on the armor of God and think, speak and act in the ways in ways that affirm life even if it rocks the boat. He ought to know, he wrote those words while he was jailed and sitting in chains.

This concludes our sermon series on becoming God's new people. It is a way of life that calls the faint of heart, the risk averse, those willing to compromise and fly below the radar; calls them to fight those who use fear as motivation and scarcity as threat with the spiritual

weapons of truth and righteousness, proclaiming the gospel of peace as God empowers them to do. Amen.

Resist, stand up, fight back where we live and work and play for evil makes no distinction; with heart and voice, if not sword and shield confront those who use fear as motivation and scarcity as a threat. Amen.