

Sermon at June 2016 Presbytery
Presbytery Moderator, Leslie Mardenborough,
(Ruling Elder, White Plains)

Prayer

Gracious God, as we turn to your Word for us, may your Spirit rest upon us. God, open our eyes to see connections that we have never seen before. May we feel the holy threads that weave through all the world. Help us to be steadfast in our hearing, in our speaking, in our believing, and in our living. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Ephesians 6 :10–18 NRSV

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against rulers, against authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places.

Therefore 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. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming

arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Whose Battle? Whose Strength?

I'm a city girl, born raised and lived the first 40 or so years of my life in the Bronx. Although we mostly lived with front and back yards filled with roses and other flowers, I basically played on concrete sidewalks and front stoops. Loved the giant fir tree in my grandmother's front yard largely because my father and uncles struggled to get Christmas lights on it each year and that was a sight to behold. But, I never connected with the outdoors as "nature."

So, I had difficulty connecting to people and challenges that encouraged me to find God in nature. Then, last year I took my on again, off again morning meditation time to my deck. For the first time while gazing over my yard, the struggling flower bed I was trying to nurture, the ground hogs that have been co-residents of our property since we moved in in 1984 and the family of deer that last summer appeared out of nowhere most mornings (and eventually destroyed a different flower bed and our vegetable

garden)...for maybe the first time in my life the outdoors became my place to enter into the presence of God.

Since I get up at the crack of dawn, I found myself with enough time to not just pray at, but to converse with God. And one morning I found myself praying through a cloud of dismay and confusion. Not about me or any of the craziness happening in my life, but about how and what to pray for the world. I was overwhelmed by my strong aversion to what some call American Christianity or the Religious Right. I was unbearably sad, and yes angry, about the violence that surrounds us in our everyday life, the life of our country and, certainly the world. People were being wounded, maimed, and killed around the world. People were being abused, imprisoned, treated as “less than” aliens, starved, subjected to no or poor medical care and so on. The world, including the United States, was and is a mess.

I was honest with God that morning. I wasn't ready to ask God to end us just yet. Even if I could be assured that people who believed (just not in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior) could be saved by God's grace, there were too many people who had never had the opportunity to hear the Good News...or the version they'd heard had been based only on repentance from sin. I have accepted that I don't know what God plans for those who don't know and love Christ, and that I maybe never will. But, I desperately hope that there is another path other than the one I insist on taking.

I believe that when God's kingdom comes the victory already won over the Enemy will be proclaimed. There will be peace everywhere and in everything. But, for now the battle will rage on.

So, as I prayed these messy and long-winded thoughts, I began to hear music in my head. It was the first verse of "The Battle is the Lord's, written and sung by contemporary gospel artist Yolanda Adams:

There is no pain Jesus can't feel, no hurt He cannot heal All things work according to His perfect will No matter what you're going through Remember God is using You for the battle is not yours It's the Lord's

So, I was drawn to the verses of Ephesians we just read. As confused as I might be about what to pray for, much less what to do, what I did know was that throughout the Bible we are urged not to be afraid. This is what Paul did when writing these words to the church in Ephesus. The battle is being fought by and against God's foes. Our role is not to go forth into that battle but to stand firm where we are, in our current time, when assaulted by what Paul calls "the cosmic powers of this present darkness" and it will be God's strength that enables us to withstand the forces of evil.

I know that Presbyterians don't like to talk about God's enemies, but that doesn't make them inactive. How else can we understand Christ's death, much less the violence,

oppression, abuse and the human propensity to ascribe to God those human traits and behavior we cling to. And this throughout all of human history. Regardless of how we view the absolute reality of the Garden of Eden, we know that the battle from a human perspective started there. It continued through the Old Testament with Israel's difficulty keeping faith in their God and doing what they were told to do. In the New Testament we even get to see the battle more directly when Satan tempts Christ. And everything after Palm Sunday until Easter morning is a whirlwind of those forces acting as if the battle was over.

We more or less quote Ecclesiastes and claim "there's nothing new under the sun." But it's true. There has always been violence, oppression, abuse and so on. It seems that humankind just can't learn from the mistakes and missteps of the past. How depressing. But, that's no reason for those of us who have accepted Christ as our Lord and Savior not to stand with and for the triune God in the face on the unrelenting assault of God's foes because God continues to keep his/her promise to strengthen us, to help us, and to uphold us with his victorious right hand.

God has given us everything we need to stand strong and firm. To continue to be witnesses to God's majesty, God's power and God's grace.

As we move through this Presbytery year we will explore what armor God has provided us so that we can stand firm confidently. What is it? How does it work? What do we have to do to hone our skills in using it?

But, Paul doesn't end this section of his letter with that list of a belt of truth, a breastplate of righteousness, shoes that will make us ready to proclaim the gospel, a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation, and a sword of the Spirit.

Paul takes us back to where this all started for me...to the absolute strength God gives us when we pray. We are to pray faithfully and in the Spirit...even when our prayers seem jumbled, unclear, even pathetic. We are to stay alert to the battle raging around us, and to persevere in supplication for God's people who are buffeted by the attacks of God's foes.

And verse 19, which was not read earlier, encourages us to pray for one another, those of us charged with being bold witnesses to Christ, as we spread the good news. Let it be so. Amen.