
The Whole Armor of God

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Proper 15B**

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

--Ephesians 6:10-20

What happens when a Christian preacher starts to talk about war?

Some folks always want the preacher to be addressing issues of war and peace. Some folks, hearing me ask just that one question this morning, are already scared to death!

Some of you know that I try to begin all my Cathedral meetings each week with a very brief reading of the next Sunday's scriptures. Each week, the Cathedral publishes a leaflet called "Episcopalians in the Word," which contains each of the lessons we will read the following Sunday. Folks have a chance to read the Bible passages before they are used on the following Sunday.

This past week, I read the passage we have just heard, the passage from Ephesians, chapter six. I was intrigued, all week, by how faithful folks discussed the passage. Some folks were entirely horrified that St. Paul would use such military imagery in his teaching. "What is all this talk about defensive armor?" they asked, "breastplates and shields, and helmets, and swords!" It sounds like something out of the medieval ages, something like the crusades!

Other folks jumped right into the military imagery. "Yes, sir," they acknowledged, "there is definitely a war going on, there's war out there, and we must be dressed out in full armor."

When Christians talk about war, the conversation can be volatile. Even when Christians use military imagery, when we sing such hymns as "Onward Christian Soldiers," the reactions can be as unstable as nitroglycerin.

Despite all that, and maybe because the issue is so volatile, I am actually fed by these highly militaristic words from Ephesians, chapter six. In a nutshell, here's why: Here we have a Christian preacher: St. Paul nonetheless, who certainly knew about the use of violence to reach certain ends; after all, it was he who condoned the stoning of Stephen back in Acts, chapter seven. Here we have St. Paul trying to compare the Christian ethical life to military combat attire.

What happens is startling! Because the imagery changes! The initiative changes from defense to offense, and the imagery changes from physical violence to spiritual peace. Thus, the military sense of this passage is completely upended, transformed, into something else.

What happens when a Christian preacher starts to talk about war? The conclusion turns out to be peace.

This passage from Ephesians might well have something to say to us today, to us who are worried about war, or about terrorism, or about random violence. For we live in an age of war, and terrorism, and random violence. Our nightly newscasts feed our anxiety with the latest bomb scares. We still wonder about who killed a little girl in Boulder, Colorado ten years ago. Almost every nightly newscast opens its evening with a story about blood spilled. "If it bleeds, it leads."

All these phenomena are real. We live in one of the most civilized countries in the world, but we learn daily of senseless violence, and we ponder daily where the next terror might strike.

How should we defend ourselves? Should we go out and buy the latest handgun? Should we construct a tremendous immigration and customs shield along our entire borderline? Should we take our swords and bombs, and slash and burn an avenue for democracy in the Middle East?

I know, I know, there may be legitimate occasions for such actions. But what is the way of the Lord?

Saint Paul, in this sixth chapter of Ephesians, provides at least three responses. First, he says "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power." These words imply that the power Christians rely upon is not the ordinary powers of this world. Over and over again in the Bible, God's leaders caution us against relying upon worldly strength and earthly power. The psalmist says "some trust in chariots and some trust in horses, but we -we!" "will trust in the name of the Lord our God" (Psalm 20:7; Isaiah 2:7; Isaiah 31:1). These days, just substitute the words "planes and guns" for "chariots and horses." Some trust in planes and guns, but we will trust in the name of the Lord our God.

Again, the issue is where do we put our ultimate trust? Sadly, in our day and time, there is a need for the military. There is a need for our policeman to wear guns. But those weapons, especially when they are great and powerful, should never be a substitute for trust in the spiritual grace of God.

Secondly, Paul says that our battle is not against blood and flesh. It is not against certain persons upon whom we pile all our anxiety and blame. Rather, our battle is a spiritual one; there are cosmic powers which will always use weapons of destruction and violence. It is the devil who relies upon violence. It is the evil one who relies upon terrorism. It is the cosmic powers of this present darkness who shed innocent blood.

That should never be our battle. Our battle is against spiritual forces; and physical weapons are useless, they are futile, in that fight.

Thus, Saint Paul, in this passage, in a third response, substitutes a proactive spiritual power for every traditional defensive physical armament. Listen to this! It is amazing.

Our earthly powers would say put an ammunition belt around your waist. Saint Paul says put on the belt of truth. Truth is a greater tool than bullets for making peace and being secure. Our earthly powers would say put on a Kevlar vest; protect yourself! Saint Paul says put on the breastplate of righteousness. Ah! There's word missing from our nightly newscasts; where is righteousness? Show us a righteous life. Show us someone willing to stand up publicly, defended by righteousness and not a Kevlar vest.

Our earthly powers say wear iron-toed combat boots. Saint Paul says "as shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you

ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." Again, these are not defensive garments. These are proactive garments, garments which take the offensive: shoes that help you proclaim peace.

Take the shield of faith, says Saint Paul, not the latest high technology bomb-screening machine in the airport. It is faith that saves us, not flying safely to our next luxury.

Take the helmet of salvation, says Saint Paul, not the headpiece of endless propaganda. It's amazing what we pipe into ears, from rude talk shows to raucous and disorderly music. All that is propaganda, designed to take our minds off of salvation. Salvation! The word means "wholeness." Take the helmet of wholeness and good health.

And for a sword, for a gun, instead of some laser trigger, says Saint Paul, take the word of God. The word of God, which always speaks of love incarnate, of peace made real, of salvation that is deep and wide.

What happens when a Christian preacher talks about war? There may be a need for military imagery. That might be the first grade level of our vocabulary. But the way of the Lord transforms weapons of physical force and defensiveness into constructive acts of spiritual power and grace.

"It is the spirit that gives life," says Jesus in today's gospel, "the flesh is useless." I know there are reasons to care for our flesh, to protect our families, to protect our country, in this age when the evil ones uses terror and random violence. I know that.

But I long for us Christians to use the spiritual equipment that God has given us. If we want to enjoy security and peace, and order and civilization, we must stand with something else besides mighty horses and high tech chariots. We must stand with the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the word -that mighty and loving and peace-giving word-- of God.

AMEN.

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