**Ephesians 6:10-23, Gifts For Peace**

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I want to begin this morning’s sermon with two stories. The first comes from a December 2018 article in *The Atlantic* entitled “American Exorcism: Catholic Exorcisms are on the Rise in America.” The article recounts how, in America, requests for exorcisms and reports of demon possession in America are on the rise, which has overwhelmed Catholic exorcists’ ability to handle the sheer number of cases. Yale professor of history Carlos Eire is quoted in that article as saying: “As people’s participation in orthodoxy Christianity declines, there has always been a surge in interest in the occult and the demonic,” evidence of a “hunger for contact with the supernatural.” The article is disturbing, and though I have read it several times, I still cannot read it without the chills running down my spine causing me to stop and pray every few minutes for divine protection. The author of the piece, after recounting the stories of demonic possession – some of it even caught on video – gives a reductionistic account of what he witnesses: “all I could settle on, though, was that the camera had captured Louisa in some kind of dissociative state in which her emergent identity believed itself to be inhuman.” But still, some of the healthcare professionals mentioned in the piece are uncertain; the chairman of Columbia’s psychiatry department, for example, is quoted as saying that throughout his career, he has seen some cases “that could not be explained in terms of normal human physiology or natural laws.” This is the first story: the story, perhaps, of some spiritual evil that afflicts people beyond the understanding even of the best healthcare professionals in the country.

 The second story happened to me last September in an Anglican church just outside of Nashville, Tennessee. I was there to visit some friends, and just a few rows ahead of me in church was a little girl – should could not have been more than a few months old – in a flowing white dress that was at least twice as long as she was. Her mother was holding her over her shoulder, and she was facing the back of the church and looking around at all the people. I watched that baby the entire service, thinking about how small she was, how delicate she seemed in her mother’s arms. Then, as the preaching and the Eucharist concluded, her parents stood up and began to bring her to the front of the church; her flowing, white dress was her baptismal gown. The priest began the baptismal rite, including a series of questions and answers which, since the child was an infant, her parents answered for her. Among them was this question, taken directly from the Book of Common Prayer: “Do you renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the sinful desires of the flesh, so that you will not follow them, nor be led by them?” “Do you renounce the devil and all his works?”

 The first story introduces us to a power incomprehensible to modern medicine, a dark and malignant force that some have experienced firsthand. The second story tells us of a small baby swearing undying warfare, hostility, and enmity to this force. What I saw that morning in Tennessee was the initiation into the ranks of God’s faithful a dissident from the Prince of the Power of the Air, a rebel from the usurping Principalities and Powers that govern this world against the wishes of its rightful king, a loyalist to that one true king who swore that she would never bow to them, no matter how powerful they might be. “Out of the mouth of babes and infants,” the Psalmist confesses to God, “You have established strength on account of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger” (Psalm 8:2).

 The text before us this morning makes sense of both of these stories by reminding to us Christians that this dark power is real – even if we cannot recognize particular instances of its operation, and by instructing us how we might live a life in opposition to it and have some measure of success over it – which is why it is inspirational and not folly that a baby can swear unending warfare against the greatest created power, the Devil, in all of the world.

 This text is Paul’s closing words to the Ephesians, and this is the last sermon in our series on this book. The argument of the text is simple. It begins with an exhortation, followed by a reason for that exhortation. What follows then is a specification of how the instruction is to be obeyed.

 The exhortation is this: “be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (6:10-11). The reason for this exhortation follows immediately: “we do not wrestled against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (6:12). And the specification for how to obey the instruction follows from vv.13-18.

The argument of the text is simple, and if you recall the content of Ephesians as a whole, you will note that the themes he addresses here are not new. Paul already told us about the evil powers of this world, and about Christ’s authority over them, and about Christ’s plan to exercise that authority in breaking those powers. Paul told us already about the Father’s power which “raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly placed, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet” (Eph. 1:20-22).

Paul told us already that the condition of those outside of Christ is characterized as being “dead in trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:1-2).

Paul told us already that God’s plan of creating the Church from among the world was in order to “make known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10) the wisdom and the power of God. Paul told us already all of this, and so it is fitting and sensical that these words be his closing words. A whole theory of history is laid out for us in this book, according to which God is liberating a people from a kingdom of darkness and transferring their citizenship into the kingdom of his glorious light, and now Paul says to us: this is the story that I have given to you. Live within that story. Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might, because God contends with the Devil every day for you, and you contend with God *against* the Devil each day for the world. Karl Barth’s brief sermon on this passage reminds his hearers that:

“Christians are called to prepare, to contend, and to struggle each new moment as earnestly as if it were the first, and to struggle each new moment as earnestly as if it were the first, the beginning of the journey.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

And though I do not think this is a terribly difficult passage to understand, I think it may be difficult fully to believe. After all, we educated and enlightened moderns look strangely at people who speak in public about demons and their oppression; perhaps you even had that thought flit through your mind when I began this sermon with a story about demon possession. We are way of attributing to demons what ought better to be attributed to science. And I agree with you. At the beginning of his *Screwtape Letters,* C.S. Lewis writes that “there are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The mistake of the magician is to see them everywhere. The mistake of the modern is to see them nowhere. But some moderns have begun to entertain this idea; we saw this already in the article with which I began. Another case study is the theologians of the mid-20th century who wrestled with and sought to understand Fascism and Communism theologically. When faced with the genocides, the pogroms, the systematic and bureaucratized extermination of entire people groups – which ideological suppression and extermination of minority people groups continues today in certain parts of the world, these theologians recognized that the tools of modern discourse (error, sickness, ignorance) were not sufficient to grasp what was unfolding before them. So they reached for a more pre-modern vocabulary, and began to use words like ‘evil’ and ‘demonic.’ It was because they were moderns, that is, because they were insistent upon a rigorous examination and analysis of empirical facts, that they had recourse to this pre-modern vocabulary. And I think they were correct in doing so.

 But the passage is foreign to us for yet another reason, which is that we do not often experience our lives to be a harrowing passage through a dark canyon with enemies on the high ground all around us. Instead, our lives are occupied with much the same concerns as those around us. May I suggest to you that this may likewise be an insidious weapon in the enemy’s arsenal; to grant us contentedness by the waters of Babylon. But Christianity is enlistment. This is what the Baptismal Formula is designed to teach us. Our brothers and sisters around the world know this already; for them, recruitment into the ranks of Christ is opposition to principalities and powers. I was in one of those areas of the world recently. We ought to pray and fast for them. But we ought not be surprised by the opposition they face. In fact, we are commanded not to be: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:12-13).

In this context, this encouragement to put on armor makes paramount good sense. One common interpretive move for this passage is to spend an entire sermon parsing out what each of the pieces mean, how they fulfill the metaphorical function to which they are assigned in the passage. That is not my purpose here this morning. It is not a bad strategy. Instead, I want to note simply that God has equipped us with a wealth of protections, if we truly believe that the world is as Paul says it is, then wisdom demands we avail ourselves of each of the pieces of this arsenal: truth, righteousness, readiness, faith, salvation, Spirit, Word, Prayer. The word translated ‘whole armor’ here is that from which we derive ‘panoply,’ revering to a complete arsenal. The arsenal described here is that which was worn by the hoplites in the Roman army; these were the heavy soldiers who were expected to come under fire. The desk workers did not wear armor like this. And they used this whole armor for one reason: going into battle naked is not the only way to put yourself at risk; even the smallest weakness can be found and penetrated by a savvy enemy, and this is the sort of enemy with which we are concerned.

When we picture this text in the eyes of our mind, or perhaps also in your children’s study Bible, we picture a man – a Roman infantry soldier, no doubt – perhaps on his way to Gaul or Carthage to slay the enemies of Caesar. And this image is certainly one of the images in Paul’s mind; the word translated “full armor” here is “panoply,” armor that describes the heavily-armored Roman hoplites who are going to come under heavy fire.

 But we may be permitted another image. Not only individuals, but the entire Church is to put on this armor. And what image has Paul taught us to associate with the Church? “This mystery is profound,” Paul told us, “and I tell you that it refers to Christ and the Church” (Eph. 5:32). The Church is a bride, says Paul. And this long pilgrimage upon which we, the bride of Christ, are embarked is nothing less than a voyage to our wedding. Great is the joy that awaits us upon our arrival. Grave and dangerous is the journey. We travel a hostile road, as nobody knows better than our betrothed spouse, Christ, who trod this road before us. He suffered on this road, and our suffering is like his – as Peter has reminded us: “rejoice insofar as you share in Christ’s sufferings.” Our husband’s sufferings on this hostile road were even to the point of death. And with that death he has purchased for us this splendid armor – this gift for peace – which he now sends to us. Our end is peace, and joy, and life everlasting. And these are the gifts that will bring us safely home, which he has send to us because he loves us and wills us safe and peaceful passage to our own wedding. Therefore we are instructed to “be strong *in the Lord* and *in the mightiness of his power* (Eph. 6:10); that the mightiness is his means that our reception of it will be by a gift. God in this passage is adorning his bride with the gift of mightiness in power.

*“When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.”*

Our beloved husband has given us this armor as a gift of peace, and he has given us these instructions about how to tread the Valley of the Shadow of Death that he himself has trod. Therefore we pray also, in the words of John Henry Newman:

*Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom;*

*The night is dark, and I am far from home;*

The night is dark. We are far from home. The gloom encircles. Hell does not sleep. Our way lies through fiery trials. And all things are under Christ’s feet.

In the *Book of Common Prayer,* the first words to be spoken over the newly baptized are these: “We receive this person into the congregation of Christ’s flock; and do sign him with the sign of the Cross, in token that hereafter he shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and manfully to fight under his banner, against sin, the world, and the devil; and to continue Christ’s faithful soldier and servant unto his life’s end. Amen.” May that also be true of all of us, because of our careful study of Ephesians.

1. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters,* ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)