

## Armor of God

Before we dive into our primary reading, you who got your bulletin online will notice that there is a supplemental reading. Those of you who get your bulletin through the mail don't have it, but it's Ephesians 5:12-6:9. I'll recap some of it for you.

In the Bible there are passages a lot of people would call problem passages. This is one.

It's commonly called the household code. It's instructions for how the Christian home should be ordered. I'm not going to read it all but it starts out talking about marriage.

<sup>21</sup> Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

OK, so that's pretty good. Marriage works best when both partners are concerned for the well-being of the other, and not just themselves.

But then the passage goes on with this gem:

<sup>22</sup> Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup> Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Now, it does go on to say :

<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

But the reality is, too often only the first part gets lifted up. It has been used for evil purposes. It has been used to justify men dominating and even abusing their wives. It gets used to tell women they shouldn't seek their own careers and dreams outside of family life.

And it has been used to tell women it is their Christian duty to stay in an abusive marriage

Jesus' relationship with his women followers and Paul's writings about women early on reflected a surprising equality between the sexes. But as time went on, the church changed. And it relegated women to a lower position. I don't believe this is consistent with the gospel message of inclusion.

Next, we have to contend with this: <sup>5</sup> Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling,

When people who considered themselves Christians tried to legitimize slavery and the African slave trade, this is one of the passages they turned to. That use of scripture tried to justify one

of the worst evils in the history of humankind, visited on people of African descent beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

In light of where we are in the world now, I don't think passages like this can be redeemed. There are some things in the ancient texts of the Bible, that spoke only to the culture of the time. Some of those we can in all faithfulness reject because they oppose the gospel message in its entirety. This passage is one of those.

Now, on to our reading for today.

Paul started his letter to the Ephesians recounting God's immeasurable grace and love lavished on us. He lifted up a vision of the church that is truly astounding.

Then he moved into the call that God has issued us...a call to love and build people up and build communities up. Then came his instructions for ordering a Christian home. While we can faithfully reject the things which were bound to Paul's own culture, the basic gist of looking out for the well-being of those in our family still stands.

Today's passage tells us that none of this is going to be easy. There are powerful forces at work in the world that oppose God and the well-being of God's people.

For the people of the ancient world, there was a real sense that evil on earth had a cosmic, heavenly dimension...there were powers at work beyond our little individual selves and beyond what we can see.

Paul talks about this in verse 12. Our work goes beyond just flesh and blood opponents of the gospel: we are battling against rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

There is a spiritual dimension to evil – something beyond individuals. But we also need to recognize that that cosmic power of evil finds its home in flesh and blood humans...and shows up in terrible acts of violence, exploitation, betrayal, and oppression.

On the weekend of Juneteenth – it would have been June 21, I used verses 10-12 along with one from Ecclesiastes about oppression, to talk about white supremacy. White supremacy is one of these cosmic powers of evil Paul talks about.

Racism is a pretty good example of how this works. Most people agree that racism is bad and would say they are not racist. And yet there are still powerful forces at work against black and brown people. They show up concretely in policies and structures, but their power seems to come from unseen and unspoken forces.

That's where I think this armor of God comes in. First of all, note this – this is God's armor we're putting on, not armor we build. And it's very different armor from the kind we humans often build. None of it is designed to do harm.

It's all defensive armor except the sword – and that sword is the word of God.

Picture this...this cosmic power of evil is attacking God and us...and we fend off those attacks with armor of truth, righteousness, faith, and so on.

So how does that work?

As we stand against injustice and evil, we first put on the belt of truth. We cannot defeat the forces of evil until we are willing to tell...and willing to hear the truth about them, and about the lies that back those forces up.

Then we put on the breastplate of righteousness. This is the piece of armor that brings us to say...this isn't right. When we see God's people crushed by racist policies, when we see God's people crushed by economic policies, when we see people crushed by a terrible crime or war or exploitation, or a myriad of other things, the breastplate of righteousness enables us to say this isn't what God wants for God's people. From there we can begin to work toward justice...and speak truth against the lie that too often blames victims.

Then we put on our gospel shoes and get ready to speak the gospel of Jesus' vision for the kingdom of God. This vision is an alternate vision to the one we humans concoct...it's a vision Jesus laid out in his teachings that tells us to love and forgive one another and to lift up the lowly and the outcast.

Our sword in this battle isn't one that physically cuts...the sword is the word of God. But make no mistake...this sword can cut. What it cuts is our stubborn arrogance and hard-heartedness. It's a sword that reveals all the ways we actually sometimes work on the side of the cosmic force of evil.

That sword is a two-edged sword...the word cuts to the bone our guilt when we side with evil...but then speaks forgiveness and new life...a new life of walking the Jesus way of love.

I want to finish with the shield of faith and the flaming arrows of the devil.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians makes it clear the life of faith isn't one of just sunshine, rainbows and happy thoughts.

The life of faith is hard. It's always about new life...new creation. God is always doing something new, even...and maybe especially in times of struggle. But the devil...the cosmic forces of evil...do not live for us.

What are the flaming arrows that catch your attention? Are they related to the pandemic? I'm not sure I'd put the pandemic itself in the flaming arrow of the devil category, but some of the reactions people have are.

For whatever reason, the flaming arrow that glows most brightly for me is the arrow of racism and white supremacy. And it is my shield of faith that seems to be giving me more courage to speak up.

Your flaming arrow may be something else. Maybe yours is more personal...bitter resentment over a damaged relationship, despair because of illness or frailty, addiction, fears about money, and so on.

Maybe you have secrets you can't forgive yourself for – that self-loathing you feel is a flaming arrow of the devil. It's a lie.

Or maybe, the flaming arrow that stands out for you is more of a communal arrow...something like racism or sexism or poverty or environmental issues...things that oppose God's will for creation.

What flaming arrow is demanding your attention?

The shield of faith is that which gives us the courage to stand against those cosmic forces. Once we've identified the flaming arrows of the devil that we're called to address, we don't just leap in and go it alone.

We pray...we listen to God for guidance...we talk with others in our community of faith...we get help from a wise counselor. We hear what Jesus has to say through our reading of the gospel.

Eventually, your specific call in the battle against evil will emerge. And when it does, you'll be ready...you'll put on your armor and bravely face down those flaming arrows of evil.