

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
August 25, 2024 – 14 Pentecost  
Ephesians 6:10-20  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

As you know, in the Episcopal Church as well as a number of other churches, the readings for Sunday worship are set by something called the Revised Common Lectionary. As you also know, it is not generally the custom in the Episcopal Church for priests to preach sermons twenty to thirty minutes in length. Both facts put a preacher in a bind. What to focus on? The ancient documents being read are not easy to comprehend without extensive background information or interpretive frameworks. Sometimes that's more challenging than other times. As I worked on today's sermon, I gave up! There isn't time to explain the passage from Joshua and to elucidate the passage from John's Gospel and to speak about St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, not to mention pointing out important phrases from today's portion of Psalm 34.

So, this morning I decided to focus on our reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. The Letter to the Ephesians was written as a "circular letter," one that was circulated to many churches and not like other letters of St. Paul that were written to particular groups of Christians to address particular problems or issues. This was a more general letter, something that would be helpful to any group of believers in Jesus Christ.

One theme of the letter is that Christ is the head of his body, the church. Followers of Jesus are meant to order their lives in keeping with this understanding. Christ is the head of the church, his body, and we are all members of that body. So, it follows that we are meant to look to Christ for our understanding of who God is and for guidance about how to live. This is the "main idea," the overarching concept that is just as relevant to Christians today as it was when the letter was written. Christ is our head, the source of our understanding of God and of life. We are meant to live our lives – day to day, year by year, until we go home to God – with our minds and hearts oriented toward Christ, growing into the likeness of Christ, by God's grace.

This is not an easy undertaking, as anyone who has chosen this path – or perhaps I should say, who has been chosen for this path – knows. There are many obstacles, many "enemies" in the way. I think of these words of the hymn, "Just as I am, without one plea": "Just as I am, though tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt; fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come." There are forces outside of us and forces within us that block us from putting on the mind of Christ and from living authentically as followers of Jesus. Huge national and global systems. Other individual people. Our own "besetting sins" of greed, envy, pride, lust, gluttony, anger, or sloth. Our personal and collective wounds from abuse or racism or sexism or any of the forces that thwart us from growing into the wholeness that God wants for all of God's children.

What is the source of all these obstacles? The Letter to the Ephesians names the devil. Many Christians are comfortable with the idea of the devil, and many are not. Personally, I don't find this language helpful. But I can agree with the idea of "spiritual forces of evil." I don't know where these forces originated, but I do believe in the reality of evil, and I see evil as a very powerful and dangerous force. But – but – I also firmly believe that evil will not have the last word. I am willing to bet my life on the belief that strong as evil is, love and goodness are stronger. Life will ultimately triumph over death, love over hate, goodness over evil. The empty tomb of Christ is God's last word.

In biblical studies there is a phrase that refers to the kingdom or reign of God: “already, not yet.” Jesus often said, “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” In Jesus – his teachings, ministry, death, and resurrection – God’s reign has come near to humanity. That’s the “already.” The “not yet” refers to the Second Coming of Christ in glory at the end of the age – in Greek, the *Parousia* – when God’s reign will be established forever, and all evil will be vanquished. We who live between the Resurrection of Christ and the Second Coming of Christ live in the “already, not yet” time. Christ has indeed won the victory over evil through his death on the cross and God’s vindication of his life of self-giving love in his resurrection from death. In that sense, the war is won. But before Christ comes again and God’s reign is finally established forever, evil forces continue to have power. We know that quite well, don’t we? We may believe that in Christ the war has been won, but we still face battles against evil in our lives.

Meanwhile, until the final victory of God, we struggle and contend with enemies, with roadblocks on our path to God, whether we see these as “the wiles of the devil” or something else. The Letter to the Ephesians speaks to our struggle and offers good counsel. First of all, “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.” As most of us know, we can’t win thereally difficultspiritual battles on our own, relying on our own strength. Think of your own life. What teaching of Jesus is the most difficult for you? I can tell you that mine is forgiveness, of others and of myself. This has been true for decades – definitely not a battle I have won. When we think of our most difficult roadblocks to following Jesus, the ones that present themselves over and over again in our lives, we recognize that we simply aren’t strong enough to overcome them on our own. Our strength needs to be in God and God’s power.

But we can prepare to defend ourselves in the fight against the forces of evil. We can maximize the chance of standing firm against our enemies. How?By putting on “the whole armor of God.” This armor that Paul describes is designed to help a person stand fast against the evil that threatens him/her.The passage acknowledges that there are dark powers which seek to draw believers from a life of faithful love, and this armor is meant to protect them against those powers. Both individual Christians and communities of Christians – churches – are meant to be armed with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, God’s Spirit, and prayer.

The only weapon listed is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” The word of God is Jesus and the message of God’s salvation. This sword is not for hurting but for helping. We protect ourselves against evil in order to be able to help others, by sharing the message of God’s salvation, which we do through our words and deeds, by being faithful witnesses to the truth of God.

This morning’s passage from Ephesians leads me to think of images I have seen of St. Michael the Archangel, whose feast day is September 29<sup>th</sup>. St. Michael is a spiritual warrior in the battle of good versus evil. He is often depicted in art works as dressed for battle, with sword and shield, sometimes with the vanquished devil under his foot. St. Michael is considered a champion of justice, a healer of the sick, and the guardian of the Church. He is a victorious warrior against evil, and he works for justice, heals the sick, and guards the church.

Psalms 34, verse 19 succinctly describes the position of people who seek to do God’s will and to live with truth and righteousness, who seek peace and attempt to share in God’s work in the world: “Many are the troubles of the righteous.” Yes, I think we can agree. “Fightings and fears within, without.” “But the Lord will deliver him [or her] out of them all.” That is the promise of God. The timeline for the fulfillment of God’s promise may often be hidden from us. So, while we wait, we need tolive with faith, with trust in God’s strength and God’s love, always recalling that in Jesus, the kingdom of God has already come near. In Jesus’ name. Amen.