

1 Kings 8:[1, 6, 10-11], 22-30, 41-43

Psalm 84

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

For the last four Sundays in a row, the Lectionary has provided us with scripture passages about Jesus' flesh as bread and his blood as drink. These words spoken by Jesus as instructions to his followers in how he wished to be remembered and how he intended to nourish them after he ascended into heaven were hard to hear when they were first spoken and they remain hard to hear even in our day and age. Taken literally, these words can be difficult to swallow on many levels. Indeed, when his disciples heard Jesus speak these words of instruction to his followers, many of the followers abandoned him in dismay. The ones who stayed with Jesus, the disciples, were already so fully committed to him that there was no turning back for them. As Peter said, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you *are* the holy one of God." [John 6:68-69]

We, too, know that Jesus is the holy one of God. And as believers, we have been commissioned to stand firm against evil...not just as individuals, but in the community known as the church established by Jesus to continue his work. A portion of the letter written by St. Paul to the church in Ephesus is the New Testament scripture passage that we just heard. It is a rousing call to arms...so to speak...for the beleaguered Christians huddling together against the greater forces...cultural and military...of the Roman Empire. This is the sort of speech we might expect to hear from a commanding officer sending his troops into battle... with some similarities, but also with some very distinct and important differences. It's purpose, however, is the same. St. Paul is rousing 'the troops' so to speak. He's encouraging them. He's giving them a sense of purpose. He is strengthening their resolve to practice their faith. And he is assuring them that they have been given all they need to be victorious over the destructive and dangers spiritual forces of evil.

These Ephesians that St. Paul addresses are being asked to 'stand firm against' and to 'resist' evil. They are not being encouraged to be the aggressors in going after evil. Evil tends to come to us. We don't need to go seeking it out. As Christians, we are *still* being asked to 'stand firm against' and to 'resist' evil. Remember that St. Paul is speaking to the church in Ephesus...the community of believers...so he is not suggesting that any of them proceed alone in their resistance of evil. This resistance is a charge to the entire church community. This is a mission they are to pursue together against the cosmic and spiritual forces of evil. And in the Roman Empire, as in the world today, there are many opportunities to do just that. There is a 'call to action' on a daily basis that comes at the end of a long list of instructions to the Ephesians from St. Paul. These last instructions are about resistance, not aggression. Look at the whole armor that St. Paul describes:

- Fasten the belt of truth around your waist
- Put on the breastplate of righteousness [a right relationship with God]
- Put on whatever shoes will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace
- Take the shield of faith
- Take the helmet of salvation [reminiscent of the sign of the cross on our foreheads at baptism]
- Take the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God

The only piece of armor here that has any relationship to aggression is the sword...and it is actually not aggressive...it is the Word of the Lord. The very nature of this armor indicates that it is the armor of survival, not the armor of aggression.

The people of the church in Ephesus must have been relieved to be given this 'armor' by St. Paul. They are at odds with the culture at large and they have created rifts in their families by following Jesus and they have been expelled from the only religious community they have ever known...the local synagogue. They are beleaguered people. They are the underdogs. They are estranged from everything familiar they have known all their lives. At times in our own culture many of us know how they must have felt. It's hard to step out of the crowd. It's scary to be set

apart...but that's what following Jesus does to all of us...even in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. It tends to set us apart. People trying to follow Jesus can easily find themselves out of step with the rest of the culture, but no one is being asked to go it alone. St. Paul is speaking to the entire Christian community at Ephesus...so when he says "you" he is speaking the plural "you"....all of you! And that includes all of us! We stand strong together...not against individual people or even groups of people...but against the dark, spiritual forces that would lure us away from the love of God and His commandments. Those dark and dangerous spiritual forces prey on us every day.

Just as we do not do battle alone, the evil we seek to resist is a spiritual force, not an individual person or even a group of people. Probably one of the most recognizable sources of evil that any of us have identified would be the Nazis in Germany in the middle of the twentieth century. In retrospect, all of us would probably agree that there were evil forces at work there. But the evil force and the person propelled or motivated by the evil force are not one in the same. When we begin to see a person or a group of people as evil, we've crossed a very dangerous line. Whether or not someone has crossed the line and is following evil impulses does not make them any less a child of God. And we need to tread gently when thinking of eradicating the person rather than the evil force that has captured them. It's a fine line, but it's an important one...and one that we don't want to cross. Many of you may remember seeing the movie "The Longest Day" which recreated D-Day from a number of different perspectives. In one scene, as the Allies were closing in on a Nazi headquarters, two German soldiers were frantically burning documents to keep them from falling into Allied hands. As they are working feverishly, one German soldier says to the other, "I can't believe the Allies have gotten this close! It sort of makes you wonder whose side God's on, doesn't it?" That line was stunning. I've never forgotten it!! It had never occurred to me to think that any of the Nazis had even once believed that they were doing what God wanted them to do. It's a sobering lesson for us to realize that no matter how 'bad' we think someone is...every single human being is a child of God...every single one!

Yes. We need to do battle. Yes. We need to be willing to participate in a spiritual battle. But our struggle is not with flesh and blood opponents. It is with the dark and dangerous spiritual forces that rule the world. Sometimes that's a very difficult to sort out. Spiritual hosts of wickedness guide and manipulate world rulers of this present age, but the battle is not with other people. It is with the powers of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Dark powers adapt readily, eager to draw believers from a life of faithful love. God's armor empowers believers through the millennia to grasp and resist such manipulation. Those pieces of armor that St. Paul described that constitute the garb of an individual soldier. In the context of serving as equipment for prayer, they are also the armor of the church as a body. We wear these gifts together. The shield, for example, is the shield of faith. It covers the breast of the one carrying it as well as two thirds of the soldier marching behind. On each side of the shield are fasteners that attach to the shield of the soldier on either side. In battle, the line moves as one as they are all attached to each other.

By the grace of God and with God's armor around us, we "stand therefore" shoulder to shoulder as Roman soldiers would do, as today's riot police do: an impenetrable wall of strength.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.