

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Ephesians 6: 10-18
“Onward – Christian Soldiers”
13th Sunday after Pentecost
August 23, 2015

The letter to the Ephesians was written to encourage people whose allegiance to Christ set them at striking odds with their own families and with their nation, the Roman Empire. Paul’s intent in writing the letter was to strengthen their faith so that they would be able to stand firm in the face of this opposition.

Paul made extensive use of metaphor to underscore his core message. Last Sunday’s text, also from Ephesians, contained the use of the metaphor of the body and the metaphor of a building. Today’s text relies on an extended metaphor: the uniform of a first-century Roman soldier.

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In the verses which immediately follow those which have just been read, Paul calls himself “an ambassador in chains.” He was in prison, and it is not a stretch for us, is it, to imagine him looking at the Roman soldier who was guarding him as he penned his letter to the Ephesians?

As he looked the soldier over from head to toe, he saw the various parts of the regulation regalia of the Roman army.

He saw the wide belt around the soldier’s waist on which was hung his sword and by which he gathered up his clothes for battle. He likened it to the spiritual belt, that is, truth, truth being that on which all faith hangs.

He wrote of putting on the “breastplate of righteousness.” To guard his trunk, his vital organs, the soldier wore a breastplate of solid metal. Perhaps were we writing in our own day, we likely would write of putting on the Kevlar vest of right living, so that the temptation to veer from faithfulness might never penetrate our hearts.

Paul writes next of feet. A Roman soldier’s combat boots were thick, hobnailed sandals that both protected and anchored their feet in battle. In this metaphor, Paul points to the necessity to be firmly grounded in God.

Paul then exhorts his readers to “take up the shield of faith.” The shield of a Roman soldier virtually covered the entire front of his body. It was made of nearly inch thick wood, was wrapped in leather, and was edged with metal. It was often soaked in water before battle, so that it would extinguish the flaming arrows shot by the enemy. Paul is saying that the forces of evil will always be lobbing arrows at believers. When lies come whizzing through the air, our best defense is confidence in the One who gives us the gift of faith.

Finally, believers must receive two more weapons. One is the helmet of salvation. The Roman soldier’s helmet was heavy and hot, so the soldier would wait until the last minute to put it on. But put it on he did, or his head was vulnerable to attack. Once his helmet was on, he reached for his sword, the only offensive weapon in this panoply. The sword is the Word of God, and it was with this weapon that Jesus himself parried Satan’s thrust in the wilderness, saying “it is written...one does not live by bread alone...do not put the Lord your God to the test...worship the Lord your God and serve only God,” exhorting believers to have the confidence that in his own act of defying evil through his knowledge and appropriation of scripture, Christ has cleared the way and is reaching out his hand to pull us up alongside him. (1)

Paul, peering through the bars of his prison cell at the Roman soldier who was guarding him, wasn’t hesitant about appropriating military metaphors to describe faith. Some would undoubtedly find this ironic. Remember the Roman Empire was no friend to Christians so what he is doing is taking a repugnant image and standing it on its head so that it describes a deep and abiding faith which stands firm in the face of the evil.

While Paul wasn’t hesitant to use military metaphors, the church has largely backed away from these images in recent years. The old hymns “Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war” and “Stand up, stand up for Jesus, Ye soldiers of the cross,” have largely been relegated to gathering dust on the hymnic bookshelf.

There is good reason for this. I heard someone say not long ago, “The purpose of the military is to break things and kill people.” I would take issue of this definition of the military. I have served as a pastor in two strong military cities—Jacksonville, Florida, and San Antonio, Texas—and am married to a Vietnam veteran myself, and I have never

heard a soldier, sailor, Marine, or air force officer describe the military in such a way. I have heard many of them strenuously object to such descriptions, however. Nevertheless, the history of Christianity has periods in which we have been guilty of breaking things and killing people, so why would we want to use metaphors which might tempt us into such theology. Because use of military images to describe faith can lead to misuse and misunderstanding, there is good reason to reject its too frequent and too casual use.

On the other hand, as we read Ephesians today, might there be a way that we can reclaim Paul's military imagery as offering us insight and guidance for our own journey of faith?

I believe that there is, especially as we reflect on the events of the past few days.

In the remainder of the sermon, I will point to two particular aspects of faith in which our understanding can be enhanced and strengthened through the military metaphor. The two are community and preparation.

One of the strong characteristics of Paul's encouragement to the Ephesians is that it is a word to the whole church, not to single individuals. Yes, it is true, the armor is for individuals and their lives, but more importantly, it is the community as a whole that is armed with faith, truth, peace, God's spirit, and prayer. The words calling upon believers to stand fast are plural. One believer alone does not have to be a kind of Don Quixote for God in the midst of a godless world, tilting at windmills and therefore not taken seriously. (2)

We have witnessed this week a contemporary metaphor for this corporate experience of faith as those close to the Army Ranger training of Captain Kristen Griest and Lieutenant Shaye Haver have described it.

One of the most important evaluations that those who are training to be Rangers face is the peer assessment given by fellow students. Some of the most emphatic positive assessments for Captain Griest and Lieutenant Haver were from those men who said that they began the course very skeptical the women could make it but quickly realized how wrong they had been.

Second Lt. Zachary Hagner said his mind "completely changed" one day as he was growing weary of carrying a heavy weapon, and others in his group would not help. But Captain Griest stepped in.

"Nine guys were like, 'I'm too broken, I'm too tired.' She was just as broken and tired, and took it from me almost with excitement," Lieutenant Hagner said. "I thought she was crazy for that."

Another second lieutenant, Michael V. Janowski, said he did not think he would have made it to graduation had it not been for a similar intervention by Lieutenant Haver. "No matter how bad she was hurting, she was always the first to volunteer to grab more weight...I would trust her with my life."

And at the graduation of the female Rangers, there were about 50 women who had graduated from West Point who were present. One of them, Donna McAleer, a 1987 graduate of West Point, spoke to a reporter after having made a red-eye flight from Salt Lake City to Columbus, Georgia. "We have been working on this for decades. There are thousands of servicewomen who are behind them." (3)

I, for one, cannot think of a better metaphor for the community that the church is called by God to be. God gives us the armor, but we don't wear it alone. We are "in the Lord," Paul writes, which means that we share it with Jesus and with one another. We entrust our lives to each other. We encourage one another. We carry one another's burdens when one of us is too broken or hurting or tired to carry the burden for himself or herself. And in this, God grants us the strength to live out our lives of faith in whatever soul-sucking and death-dealing circumstances may aim their bullets in our direction.

A second manner in which military metaphors for the Christian faith can serve us well in these days is in the way that military folks are examples to all of us of what it means to be prepared, for whatever comes, even when it means coming face to face with evil, with death itself.

And we have seen what that looks like this week too, haven't we?

A couple of days ago, three friends from middle school days were on a train in the middle of having a fine holiday in Europe, visiting Rome, Venice, Munich, Berlin, and Amsterdam, looking forward to their next stop in Paris. One of them, Alek Skarlatos, is a specialist in the Oregon Army National Guard; he had just returned home following a nine-month deployment in Afghanistan. Another, Spencer Stone, is an airman first class in the United States Air Force.

From all accounts, when a gunman appeared and events began unfolding on the train, there was great confusion. However, not on the part of Spencer Stone who was the first to jump up and run toward the gun-carrying assailant, followed by Alek Skarlatos, and then their friend Anthony Sadler.

No one on the train was expecting a sudden act of terrorism. No one was expecting this, but when it happened, Alek Skarlatos and Spencer Stone had been prepared by their training, their training kicked in, and they ran toward their own possible deaths in order to save the lives of others.

Just so, Paul did not expect following Jesus to be easy. He wrote about the life of those in the church as if it is going to be a kind of war. Someone has written that no soldier, sailor, Marine, or airman ever exclaimed in hurt tones during a battle, "Hey—they're shooting at me." Getting shot at is what you prepare for. (5)

And thus, it is fitting that we talk about the importance of preparation when it comes to faith on this Rally Sunday.

Being a Christian is often like being in the midst of battle. Now, it is not the kind of battle of which some Christians speak. It is not a triumphal war to form a Christian government. It is not a struggle opposing non-Christians. Rather, it is a war against our own propensity to separate ourselves from the Holy One, a war against whatever would kill a desire to feed and nourish and bring joy to God's good creation. (6)

This is our battle, my dear brothers and sisters. It is our battle, and it is and will continue to be the battle faced by our children, our stepchildren, and our grandchildren. And our need for continuing preparation never ends.

It is the reason that we Presbyterians put so much effort into Christian education, into continuing faith formation....Sunday School, youth group, Disciple classes, Bible studies. Without preparation, how in the world can you expect to be prepared in the manner of Alek Skarlatos and Spencer Stone? Without the preparation that comes through regular commitment to Bible study and prayer, both alone and in community, how can you expect to know when and where and how God is calling you to wield the sword of the Spirit, that is, the Word of God, to the end that evil is defeated and every corner of the world knows peace, love, joy, and wholeness?

As an encouragement to all of us to commit on this Rally Sunday to preparing ourselves by means of Bible study and prayer, I find myself compelled to close this sermon by bringing to mind the press conference that one particular Navy veteran Jimmy Carter, held at the Carter Center this past week as he shared his thoughts about the melanoma which was discovered in his liver and then in his brain and the treatments he is now undergoing. (If you haven't seen it, I encourage you to log onto the Carter Center website and view it.)

Jimmy Carter has faced lots of challenges in his life, but now he is facing cancer and death. At the press conference, he said that when he first received the news of cancer in his brain, he thought that he probably had weeks to live. And he said, "I was completely at ease. I was pleasantly surprised that I didn't go into despair or anger." He spoke of how his greatest hope continues to be for peace in the Middle East and that he hopes that the last guinea worm in the world dies before he does. He said, "I'll be prepared for whatever comes; I'm looking forward to a new adventure." (8)

Jimmy Carter is facing what Paul himself called the last enemy to be destroyed – death. And in the face of his own death, where is he this morning? He is at his little Baptist church in Plains, Georgia, teaching Sunday School.

That is what I would call taking on the whole armor of God and standing firm.

And I can only believe that Paul would agree.

1. Stan Mast, Proper 16B, Center for Excellence in Preaching, August 17, 2015, www.cep.calvinseminary.edu.
2. Sarah Henrich, "Commentary on Ephesians 6: 10-20," www.workingpreacher.org, August 23, 2015.
3. Richard A Oppel, Jr., and Helene Cooper, "2 Graduating Rangers, Aware of Their Burden," *The New York Times*, August 21, 2015.
4. Ashley Southall, "3 Who Stopped Attack Were Boyhood Friends," *The New York Times*, August 23, 2015.
5. John Ortberg, "Roll Call," *The Christian Century*, August 9, 2003.
6. Melinda Quivik, "Commentary on Ephesians 6: 10-20," www.workingpreacher.org, August 26, 2012.
7. The Carter Center, <http://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/carter-press-conference-082015.html>.