

8/24/03

GET READY, GET SET, GO

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on August 24, 2003
Scripture: Ephesians 6:10-20

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

When I was a child my favorite hymn was Onward Christian Soldiers. We'd sing and march around the Sunday school room.¹

*Onward, Christian soldiers! Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus Going on before.*

We all knew our teacher had no intention of handing us guns and sending us out to battle non-Christians. The war we sang about was a spiritual war. And somehow, I felt, as a little boy, that I couldn't win the battle on my own. I was too small, weak and cowardly. The only way I could win was if I was in the Lord's army, surrounded by my Christian family.

Onward Christian Soldiers is no longer in our hymnals. Christians, today, need to be very careful about singing hymns with militaristic imagery. There's already too much religious militarism in the world. Islamic fundamentalists call for a holy war against the United States. Hindu nationalists burn Christian churches in India. Militant Buddhists pillage in the name of their faith. The Christian identity movement in the United States wages war on godless liberals. Jewish settlements on the West Bank are armed camps. So we need to be careful about singing hymns with military images.

And yet in our opening hymn we sang -

*Lead on, O king eternal, The day of march has come;
Henceforth in fields of conquest Thy tents shall be our home:
Through days of preparation Thy grace has made us strong,
And now, O king eternal, We lift our battle song.*

That's pretty heavy with military imagery. But the Bible is filled with military imagery. Nearly every book of the Old Testament tells of battles and the New Testament isn't much better.² For example, Jesus said, "What king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down

first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?"³ Paul urged his young friend, Timothy, to "fight the good fight."⁴ And Saint John wrote, "War broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated."⁵ If we read the Bible we can't escape military imagery.

Turn now to our New Testament lesson. Paul writes, "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." Plainly Paul is using military imagery to talk about spiritual warfare. "Our struggle is not *against* enemies of blood and flesh, but *against* the rulers, *against* the authorities, *against* the cosmic powers of this present darkness, *against* the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."⁶ Christians were few and they were up against the rulers and authorities of the Roman Empire who would soon be persecuting them. And behind the rulers and authorities Paul saw the devil, cosmic powers and spiritual forces of wickedness.

We have problems with passages that talk about the *devil*. Maybe we have a problem because we don't take evil nearly as seriously as did the early Christians. We're a little embarrassed to talk about the devil but secular musicians sing about the devil as a reality. Back in the sixties the *Rolling Stones* composed a song entitled *Sympathy for the Devil*. Christians condemned the song but if you listen to the words you'll discover that Mick Jagger and Keith Richards described the devil to a T.

*Please allow me to introduce myself
I'm a man of wealth and taste
I've been around for a long, long year
Stole many a man's soul and faith'*

Jagger and Richards knew they would trivialize the devil if they portrayed him as a man in red tights with horns carrying a pitchfork. They had the theological insight to recognize that the

devil often presents himself as a man of wealth and taste. Maybe the church doesn't take the devil seriously because we have erred too far in the direction of shallow optimism about the human condition.⁸

Americans sometimes take the simplistic view that our enemies are evil and we're good. For example, after the September 11 attacks, President Bush declared to the nation, "Our responsibility to history is already clear: To answer these attacks and rid the world of evil." I don't think so. The Bible tells us that "it's not nations that rid the world of evil – they're too often caught up in complicated webs of political power, economic interests, cultural clashes, and nationalist dreams. The confrontation with evil is a role reserved for God"⁹ and for the people of God who must be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

The Apostle Paul was deadly serious about evil and its power in the world. And if we underestimate the power of evil we won't see any need for God's armor. We'll go unarmed with no weapon except our own puny strength. Paul wants us to take evil seriously. He's telling us it's a destructive thing within society, within families, within a human life. But the armor of God is at our disposal, so that we can take our stand.¹⁰ *Put on the whole armor of God so that you will be able to take your stand.*

How do we fight? As we look over the list of armor we discover that the only offensive weapon is the sword. "Take up the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God." We go up against rulers and authorities with the Word of God. Nathan the prophet went up against King David with the Word of God and brought him to his knees confessing his sin. Jonah took up the sword of the Spirit and went to Nineveh and the King of Nineveh repented. Bishop Tutu, Nelson Mandela and Dr. Martin Luther King all renounced violence and went up against rulers and authorities with the sword of the Spirit. The great 16th century reformer, Martin Luther, wrote,

*The prince of darkness grim;
We tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure.
One little word can fell him.*

The Word of God is a more powerful than weapons of mass destruction.

In a few moments I'm going to ask the Miller/Nichols family to renounce evil and its power in the world. That's a tall order. How can we possibly keep that promise? We can't by ourselves. We need the church family. Roman soldiers, with all their armor, never fought alone if they could help it. They relied on one another for safety. If during a battle the legion were hard pressed the soldiers formed a circle, and stood with their backs to one another. One time the Emperor Vespasian was left unprotected. His soldiers immediately formed a circle around him and covered him with their shields, so he escaped unharmed. And Christians, try as we may, can't go it alone. Paul isn't addressing an individual, but the whole church in Ephesus. Like a Roman legion he's telling us to put on the armor of God and stand firmly together.

Fasten the belt of truth around your waist. Be faithful to your promises. *Put on the breastplate of righteous.* Do what's right. *As for shoes put on whatever will make your ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.* Parents, tell your children from their earliest age gospel of God's grace, love, and mercy in Jesus. *Take the shield of faith.* Put your faith in God's promises to you and your children. *Take the helmet of salvation.* We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and not by any works we do.¹¹ Finally, *Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God* – take it and read the old Bible stories to your children.

Put on the whole armor of the Lord and God will protect you from the evil in the world and in our own hearts. Within the covenant God will give us new life, guard us from evil, and nurture us in love. Put on the whole armor of God and we can be confident that our children

may continue His forever, and daily increase in the Holy Spirit until they come to His everlasting kingdom.

Ever-living God, in your mercy you promised to be not only our God, but also the God of our children. We thank you for your promises to believing parents. Keep all the children of our church always in your love. Guide them as they grow in faith. Protect them in all the dangers and temptations of life. Bring them to confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and be his faithful disciples to their life's end; in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

1 The idea for this opening came from a sermon by David Buttrick entitled "Up Against the Powers that Be.

2 Ibid.

3 Luke 14:31.

4 1 Timothy 6:12.

5 Revelation 12:7-8a.

6 Ephesians 6:11-12.

*⁷ Please allow me to introduce myself
I'm a man of wealth and taste
I've been around for a long, long year
Stole many a man's soul and faith
And I was 'round when Jesus Christ
Had his moment of doubt and pain
Made damn sure that Pilate
Washed his hands and sealed his fate*

*Refrain: Pleased to meet you
Hope you guess my name
But what's puzzling you
Is the nature of my game*

*I stuck around St. Petersburg
When I saw it was a time for a change
Killed the czar and his ministers
Anastasia screamed in vain
I rode a tank
Held a general's rank
When the blitzkrieg raged
And the bodies stank
Refrain
I watched with glee
While your kings and queens
Fought for ten decades
For the gods they made
I shouted out,
"Who killed the Kennedys?"
When after all
It was you and me
Let me please introduce myself
I'm a man of wealth and taste
And I laid traps for troubadours
Who get killed before they reached Bombay
Refrain
Just as every cop is a criminal
And all the sinners saints
As heads is tails
Just call me Lucifer*

*'Cause I'm in need of some restraint
So if you meet me
Have some courtesy
Have some sympathy, and some taste
Use all your well-learned politesse
Or I'll lay your soul to waste,
Refrain*

8 Newspaper Article, The Lewistown Sentinel, Wednesday, April 24, 1974

9 Jim Wallis. To read the entire article, which appears in the September-October 2005 issue of *Sojourners* magazine, go to:
<http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0309&article=030910>

10 First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood: Sermon: 14 November 1999

11 Ephesians 2:8-9.