

St. David's United Church  
Sermon for Aug. 22/21

"Something for Everyone"  
Rev. Tim Nethercott  
Eph.: 6:10-20

Well-known Bible passages have names. This well-known passage is called "The Full Armour of God". You probably did a dozen crafts based on it in Sunday School. Now please don't look for an overall message in what I am sharing with you this morning. Instead of a single coherent message I have three mostly unrelated things I'd like to share with you: one devotional thing, one theological thing and one Biblical studies sort of thing. So its "Something for Everyone!"

Thing One is that St. Patrick's Breastplate is a reference to this passage. St Patrick's Breastplate is an ancient poem attributed to St. Patrick. The Call to Worship we read is taken from that poem. The "Contemporary Word" was as well, although "contemporary" is the wrong term here, as he was a 5<sup>th</sup> century Irish bishop in what we call the Celtic tradition

The Celtic Christian tradition is lovely, partly because it seamlessly integrates nature--its beauty, its rhythms, into Christian spirituality. What person who longs to integrate their Christian spirituality into everyday life is not enchanted by poetry that brings together our daily walk with God and the moon, the stars, the seasons, the rhythms of the natural world? I am. I love this stuff. It has at times been a big help in my devotional life. It's inspiring to say a prayer that sees the water with which you wash your face as the same water upon which Moses floated in his basket of reeds, the same water in which Mary bathed the baby Jesus, the water in which the saints were baptised. It's a spiritual vision of the world.

Within the Celtic tradition, this prayer is called a "lorica" or a prayer for protection. Many of us have Irish or other Celtic ancestors and it is powerful to enter through poetry the enchanted world that they lived in. There were spirits in the air, in the trees, spirits underground, spirits in the garden. Good spirits and evil spirits. One's daily prayer life was a partly a matter of invoking the good spirits and seeking protection from the bad. A lorica such as St. Patrick's breastplate, was a prayer for protection from bad spirits.

That is the cultural/literary context of St. Patrick's Breastplate. It's not unlike the cultural/literary context of the author of Ephesians for whom the world was a battleground between the powers of good and evil. To us, in this skeptical scientific age, all of this talk of evil spirits or talk of a cosmic battle between the powers of good and evil is just a bunch of superstition. That stuff is for religious crackpots preaching "spiritual warfare".

And that's what I think.

Nonetheless, there was a time in my life when I needed this superstitious idea of little good and evil spirits inhabiting the corners of our lives. It was in my late 20's. I had just been through a period when I needed to leave Christianity behind. I had become allergic to my own religion. Theism was out for me—I had no sense of God—so all of this theistic religion that I had learned was now useless. I didn't want it to be useless, I wanted the religious understanding I had developed to have meaning again. What was I to do?

I think I was in roughly the same place as many of the young adults I work with. I am sure it's a place that lots of people are in. I mean having no sense of God. So I did what I have advised many other people who have no sense of God to do—which is to actively construct a sense of God for themselves.

I started by cultivating a sense of a divinity in things. I consciously adopted the vision of the world that my great great grandparents in county Cork had. A vision that included spirits in the trees, spirits in the wind, a goddess in the garden. For some reason I couldn't pray to the old God I was allergic to, but I found I could pray to these little local spirits. It was a matter of consciously embracing superstition. I'd have been embarrassed if anybody knew I was doing it. So I kept this polytheistic prayer life to myself.

And something happened. The world took on a little of the enchantment that It had lost. I was no longer cosmically isolated. I was in a world that had a second floor, a spiritual reality that I could interact with. It got my spiritual imagination working again.

After a few months I began to experiment with imagining God as Mother. That worked too. I had had a perfectly fine Dad, so I wasn't blocked by some traumatic association but I wasn't able to deal with God the Father. He remained out of reach. But I found I could pray to God as Mother without triggering my allergy. She was a little more like the local Gods I was praying to in my superstitious polytheistic prayer life.

I studied theology and discovered that there were many ways of imaging God. And there's more to that story, some of which I don't have words for. But that's enough for now. My point is to share with you my sense that there is still power and value in the spiritual vision of ST Patrick. And of St. Paul.

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So that's the devotional moment. Thing two is more theological.

I have never heard a sermon on the full armour of God in a United Church context. Why? I expect its because of the military metaphor that is being used here. It's a turn-off for the aging hippies that comprise much of our church. One sometimes feels that it is not good to import into the present the imagery, the values, the language of the ancient world. There are beautiful things hidden in our ancient texts, but along with the beautiful comes things we don't want:

misogyny, homophobia, a hierarchical structuring of society. And in this case a certain militarism.

I understand the thinking that wants to leave the texts that teach these things in the past. When I entered formation for ministry I wrestled with this. On the one hand I loved the Christian tradition. So many of the world's greatest minds have exercised themselves in the Christian tradition. So many of the things we consider vital to whatever progress human beings have made have come from Christianity. I would argue that humanism comes from Christianity. That the art of the renaissance, the music of the western tradition, that notions of Human Rights, that Socialism and scores of other things I believe to be excellent, are in one way or another at least in part, products of Christianity.

On the other hand, I did not want to be part of even indirectly promoting the negative things that I enumerated above.

When I started in seriously in Biblical studies, I made up my mind. I felt called to spend part of my life providing the nuance that allows us to continue to hear God speaking in Scripture. And the nuance in this passage is to recognize that: "Yes, there is a military metaphor here that is ostensibly at odds with the peacableness that Jesus seems to be teaching and that our Canadian tribe often wants, without great justification I might add, to identify with."

But that's a misreading of the text.

St Paul, or whoever wrote Ephesians is not glorifying the Roman military here. He is in fact making an ironic commentary on militarism. He is not glorifying warfare: he is suggesting that we trade in our weapons of war for weapons of peace. Replacing the breastplate of bronze with the breastplate of righteousness. Replacing the sword of iron with the sword of the spirit. This is not a military metaphor that St. Paul is employing. In fact its an anti-military metaphor.

So I think this passage is more useful than we have given it credit for.

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Thing three is a Biblical Studies moment. It's a note about how we actually interpret this passage. This is the end of my sharing with you today. And there is a twist right at the end of this part. So listen carefully or you might miss it.

Let's look at an image of "The Whole Armour of God". (Soldier Slide)

The author of the book of Ephesians, traditionally reckoned to be St. Paul, uses the image of the Roman soldier in full battle dress to describe the spiritual equipment of the Christian warrior in a cosmic battle between good and evil.

To us this may seem a bit quaint, but I expect to his audience it was not. Soldiers such as these were a common sight in the Mediterranean at the time. He is the cruise missile, the military

drone, the Zumwalt-class destroyer of his day. He is high tech. I said he is in full battle dress, which I expect is accurate, but in fact these guys walked like this. Pretty intimidating, which I am sure was the point.

He has a belt, the first piece of armor he would don. It held a number of tools and weapons, held his whole getup together and was available to tuck in the tunic for work or when on the move.

There is a breastplate, bronze or iron. It protects the internal organs. Its interesting that it covers only the front of the body, because supposedly he would never turn his back on the enemy.

The shoes—we would call them sandals--were comfortable in both warm and cold weather. They laced up to the ankles and had hobnails on the bottom. The warning that a troupe of Roman soldiers was headed your way was the clattering sound of these hobnails on the Roman pavement.

The shield was made of two layers of wood at crossgrain to each other, covered with leather. They were wielded individually but designed to fit together when held over head to protect a cohort from arrows. The leather could be dampened to extinguish the “fiery darts of the enemy”.

The helmet was iron or bronze often with plumes to identify rank. It could not have been comfortable.

And finally the sword, or gladius, a short sword used in an upward thrusting motion to get under the rib cage. Gruesome. A line of these burly men behind their shields with gladii thrusting out between them was the terror that subdued the world.

Now St. Paul takes this familiar Roman armour designed for physical warfare and uses it as an analogy for spiritual warfare. In our translation the belt represents Truth, the breastplate represents Righteousness, the shoes represent the Gospel, the shield Faith, the helmet Salvation, and finally the sword represents the Spirit.

Now there are two ways to interpret the qualities named above. We can take them in their narrow religious sense. Or we can take them in their more broad general sense, not as religious virtues but as ethical qualities.

So we could relabel this image:

The belt would represent not capital “T” truth, but lower case “t” truth. Not so much the infallible, eternal Truth, but the quality of truthfulness. These are very different as you know: my absolute religious truth can get in the way of simply being a truthful person.

The breastplate of Righteousness. The Greek word for righteousness which we might generally understand as being “free of sin” can equally be translated as “justice”. To be free of sin according to the norms of my Christian community may be worlds away from doing justice. I think you will agree with me there.

“Shoes ready to proclaim the Gospel” has a narrow religious meaning which we are familiar with. But note that it’s the Gospel of Peace. Peace meaning “shalom” or fullness of life for everyone. That’s a little bit different from the gospel one hears from TV preachers, isn’t it?

The “Shield of Faith”: Faith again has a narrow religious meaning as in “saving faith in Christ which takes hold of the grace of God imputing eternal salvation to the sincere believer”. It also has the broader spiritual meaning of trust: trust in life and in God as the source and end of life.

And finally the helmet of salvation. Again, this has a narrow religious meaning we are familiar with. But the Greek word that we translate salvation also means healing.

So, you can understand this Christian soldier to be dressed in the belt of truthfulness, the breastplate of Justice, with shoes of Peace, the shield of trust and the helmet of healing. It is up to each of us reading the Scripture ourselves to decide how to interpret this and other passages. I just want to say that either interpretation is valid.

I believe that the same sort of choice, a narrowly religious interpretation or a broader spiritual/ethical interpretation of Scripture is available to our Muslim friends as well.

It is incumbent upon Muslims to engage in Jihad. But the thing is, to my understanding, the term “jihad” can refer either to physical warfare to advance Islam or to the inner struggle, the battle one wages in one’s own heart and mind to live ones life Islamically.

Clearly, a great deal depends upon how religious folks use our Scriptures.

Amen.