

## The Armor of God

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 22, 2021

*Therefore take up the whole armor of God...fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness...take the shield of faith... the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit which is the Word of God. Ephesians 6:13-17*

Abraham Lincoln had little formal education and learned to read from the Bible as one of the few books available in 19<sup>th</sup> century frontier homes. While he often used Biblical references in his speeches, he never formally joined a church. He occasionally attended Mrs. Lincoln's Presbyterian Church. When asked about the preacher's sermon one Sunday, Lincoln said that it was well crafted, but it lacked one thing: *he didn't ask enough of us.*

With the new variant of the Covid virus emerging, it is not too much to ask of us to cooperate to prevent the spread of the virus by wearing a mask and maintaining a respectful distance from each other. Too many have suffered from the effects of the virus and too many have died for us to be complacent. To refuse to cooperate is to put us all in danger.

We have come to believe that our inner attitude is of far greater importance than the clothes we wear. There was a time when women and girls wore a dress and hat and men and boys wore a coat and tie for church. Just as we arm ourselves against the virus, with vaccine the Letter to the Ephesians describes the spiritual armor we need to wear to fight the battle against sin.

There is a story of an old Vermont Yankee, a man of few words, when he returned from church one Sunday was asked what the sermon was about. *It was about sin.* What did he say about it? *He's agin' it.*

Because of our history of involvement in armed conflicts around the world, the image of Christians as soldiers is not a popular one. Some of the old militant hymns such as *Onward Christian Soldiers* that we remember from Sunday school have fallen out of favor. However, a closer reading of the text of the hymn reveals that it is not about glorifying war, but about being armed for the war against sin.

There are sins that we commit as well as sins of omission. In the traditional words of confession in the Book of Common Prayer: *We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.* (Pages 41- 42) At the center of our faith is the fact that we must make no peace with oppression. When we encounter sin and evil in any form our response, or the lack of, is indicative of our character and sense of values. An old proverb tells us that a clear conscience is a soft pillow. On the other hand, if you claim to have a clear conscience it may be the result of rationalization or just a bad memory.

The Roman guards in full armor may have inspired the author of Ephesians to describe the spiritual armor necessary to withstand the forces in the fight against all that is wrong, unjust, false, and oppressive. We first put on the belt of truth to hold the armor in place. We then put on the breastplate of righteousness to defend against the slings and arrows of falsehood and injustice. On our head we place the helmet of salvation. On our feet we wear shoes sturdy enough to give us a sure footing. In one hand we hold the shield of faith to deflect against exploitation and oppression. In the other hand we hold the sword of the Spirit, the *Spiritus Gladius* that is the Word of God. In Christian symbolism the double-edged sword as the symbol of Saint Paul describes how the Word of God reaches into our innermost soul.

Underneath the armor we gird ourselves with the inner quality of being true to ourselves. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius tells his son, Laertes, *To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night follows day, thou canst not then be false to any man.* (Act 1, scene 3) If we are true to ourselves, we will not be false to anyone. Let there be no denial of the evil power of falsehood in the world today. Each day brings a new scheme to exploit the innocent and the defenseless. Whether the battleground is between nations or within ourselves, we can't expect to emerge from the battle unscathed.

John Bunyan's classic 17<sup>th</sup> century allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, is set in the form of a dream in which Christian as the main character is clothed with the spiritual armor of God. He is encouraged to persevere in keeping on the path that leads to his destination to the presence of God. He encounters characterizations of both evil and good as he overcomes all efforts to discourage him from seeking truth and maintaining his personal integrity. When he reaches the Wicket Gate in the village of Morality, he is tempted to compromise himself. Despite many temptations, he refuses to give in as he perseveres in working toward his goal. After the burdens of fear and temptation are lifted from his shoulders, he emerges victorious, and his pilgrimage is complete. He relinquishes his sword as he arrives at the river's edge. All that remains is for him to cross the river to be welcomed into the Celestial City. As he reaches the other shore the sound of trumpets can be heard.

Bunyan's classic allegory is our story. We are faced with temptations every day. Underneath our spiritual armor we arm ourselves with the knowledge of good and evil and hold fast to what we know and believe is right and true and just. Under pressure, we are tempted to rationalize our behavior and to bend the truth in our favor. When we are open and honest with ourselves, we can be trusted to be equipped in the knowledge of right from wrong, good from evil, truth from falsehood.

We must never minimize the importance of maintaining our personal integrity nor attempt to set our standard by the lowest common denominator. To give in to weakness is to compromise ourselves and thereby become victims of our own oppression. With a well-informed conscience as our best defense, we will not falter in striving toward our destination to be at one with God and with ourselves.