

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 22, 2021

Faith, Okemos

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18, Psalm 34:15-22, Ephesians 6:10-20, John 6:56-69

*The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those whose spirits are crushed.*

Psalm 34:18

Who of us who has seen this week the pictures of those on the tarmac, some even clinging to a departing plane at the airport in Kabul, who of us has not felt the great anguish of those desperate to flee their Afghan homeland? Who of us who witnessed the tears of the Haitian people following the devastating earthquake compounded by torrents of rain from tropical storm Grace, who of us has not wondered how it could be any worse for a country still scarred by the earthquake of 2010 in which thousands died and by the recent assassination of its president? And who of us who week after week see the grieving faces of those whose homes and even whole towns have been reduced to ashes and naked chimneys and blackened remnants of cars and trucks from the still raging fires in California and the Pacific Northwest, who of us cannot but wonder if our whole world is edging toward irreparable brokenness and unyielding darkness?

But all this week as I read and re-read the scriptures for today, the words of the psalmist refused to be extinguished:

*The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those whose spirits are crushed.*

We pray this morning for the Afghan people, especially for the women and children, especially for all who supported the Allied forces over these past 20 years, We pray that they will know that God, whom most in Afghanistan name Allah, whom we as Christians know most intimately in Jesus, is near them in their great desperation. We pray this morning for the people of Haiti, clearly overwhelmed and fragile and afraid, that they, even now, will know our suffering God is fully immersed in all the tragic chaos of our fallen world, that God in Christ is near them. And we pray for individuals and families in or near towns like Grizzly Flats, California that they will know that the Lord's own tears are mingled with their tears.

*The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those whose spirits are crushed.*

And then I read and re-read these opening words in the text from the letter to the Ephesians:

*Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.*

I thought not only about the plight of the most vulnerable in Afghanistan and Haiti and California, but also about us...because the devastation and darkness in all those places is highly transmissible, not unlike the delta variant of Covid-19. Even if we are not directly in the path of brutal soldiers or in the midst of flooded or crushed or burned homes and cities, on our own the immune systems of our souls cannot withstand “the cosmic powers of this present darkness.”

I think now about the questions asked of us or of our parents and sponsors when we were baptized:

*Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?*

*Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?*

*Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?*

To which we or our parents and godparents/sponsors answered: *I renounce them.*

This renunciation is the first step we would wisely take each day to keep at bay the corrosive, infectious power of the devil, the power of death and darkness, the power of despair. It is the first step we would wisely take each morning, akin to taking a tablet of vitamin C or a zinc pill, to strengthen our immunity to the wiles of the devil, to what this scripture calls “the spiritual forces of evil...” We would ask ourselves each morning: *Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?* And we would answer: *I renounce them.*

But then early in the day we’re also implored to take a second step, to get dressed. In this letter, attributed to Paul to the church in Ephesus, are these words:

*Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.*

What follows are metaphorically what we are to wear: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness (i.e. mustering the heart and will to both boldly and gently do what is loving and just); to put on shoes enabling us to go to our neighbors with the gospel of peace (of healing and reconciliation); to take up the shield of faith “to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” And lastly we are to put on the helmet of salvation (the mental awareness that in this moment, in this day, God in Christ is reaching out to save me and the whole world), and finally, take into our souls the sword of the Spirit with words from God like “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power,” words that can cut through the paralyzing fears which would cause us to quickly stumble and fall.

As it was in the time of the early church when these words about the armor of God were first written, when until the year 313 it was illegal to be a Christian in the Roman empire,

so today, though it may or may not be illegal for us to give our ultimate allegiance to Christ, it is still a serious struggle, a battle we can't fight alone to speak truth in the face of so much misinformation. It is still a struggle to patiently and lovingly persevere in actively giving of ourselves and our resources to our neighbors both here in mid-Michigan and wherever in the world our neighbors suffer and prematurely die. No less than for the early church, we must struggle mightily and bravely today to be Christians, to authentically live the gospel of sacrifice and suffering for others, to stand up for them, to die to our self-centeredness and then to rise up by the power of the Spirit. Wearing the armor of God, we rise up each day with Jesus at our side, giving ourselves once more for all who are suffering and dying.

Here is the gospel: we have this armor, perfectly fitted for each of us, perfectly fitted for congregations like Faith. We have this armor of God, from God, to do battle against the wiles of the devil, against the spiritual forces of evil.

And we have the gift of prayer:

*Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel...*

With this gift of prayer we think about and pray in the Spirit of Christ this morning for President Biden presently under considerable fire for not foreseeing and planning for an earlier exodus from Afghanistan for those especially endangered by the sweeping takeover of the Taliban. We pray that each day he may be given wisdom and courage. We pray that he would put on the whole armor of God.

We pray in the Spirit this morning for the staff of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, for the leaders and volunteers of Lutheran Disaster Response, for Samaritas, and for all others who are called to the hard, complicated, arduous work that lies ahead in bringing comfort and hope to those who are brokenhearted, whose spirits have been crushed.

In the guiding, powerful, comforting Spirit of God ever stirring within us, let us also pray for ourselves that we too might be bold in living and sharing the mystery of the gospel. With grateful hearts for this gospel, for this good news that Jesus through his suffering and dying and rising truly equips us with exactly the armor we need to engage in daily battle against the wiles of the devil, against the forces of evil, against "this present darkness," may we know and trust in our hearts and minds that our Lord is near to us and to all who are brokenhearted. May we know and trust that our Lord wills to save all whose spirits are crushed.

Amen.

JDS