

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

For Not with Swords Loud Clashing

Lead on, O King eternal! The day of march has come; henceforth in fields of conquest your tents will be our home. Through days of preparation your grace has made us strong; and now, O King eternal, we lift our battle song.

Lead on, O King eternal, till sin's fierce war shall cease, and holiness shall whisper the sweet amen of peace for not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums, but deeds of love and mercy, the heavenly kingdom comes.

Lead on, O king eternal; we follow not with fears, for gladness breaks like morning wher-e'er your face appears. Your cross is lifted o'er us; we journey in its light; the crown awaits the conquest; lead on, O God of might!

Evangelical Lutheran Worship 805

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Finally, 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.

Ephesians 6:10-11

Whether you are a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or just befuddled by it all, you know there is great tension in our country right now. Many are anxious and worried about the future. On a much smaller scale, many of us at Faith may have at least moments of anxiety and worry about the future of our congregation. It's easy to go dark, especially in times of transition in pastoral leadership. Rumors can flee and misunderstandings can abound. We may even wonder if we have a future together.

I love the inspired and inspiring words in the readings of scripture for today, words in Psalm 34 like these:

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those whose spirits are crushed. Many are the troubles of the righteous, but the Lord delivers them from every one.

I think about what it means to be righteous: through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are made righteous. Day after day we are forgiven. Day after day we are set free from the bondage to sin, to self-centeredness. We are set to do what is [righteous] right for our sisters and brothers. It is pretty much guaranteed that all of us will have many troubles, many afflictions. A near certainty that our hearts will be broken. But the Lord of steadfast love will never abandon us, will always set us free for deeds of kindness and of love and mercy.

Or I think of these words in Joshua: *“Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went and among all the peoples through whom we passed.”*

And for me right now these words from the letter to the Christians in Ephesus: *Finally, 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. For 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. 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.*

It is so important to remember that our struggle is not against a particular political leader or party, or much closer to home, not against a member of our extended family with whom we may strongly disagree, or against our pastor or any member of the congregation about whom we are troubled. It is not against our own flesh and blood, any members of the human family. Again, I think this is so important. We ought not demonize our sisters and brothers but rather recognize that we are struggling against the wiles of the devil. We are struggling against the “cosmic powers of this present darkness,” or as someone has translated, “the organized forces of malevolent spirit beings.”

We are struggling against the deceitful schemes of the devil who is always looking for ways to lure us into believing in a false righteousness. The devil, which scripture also calls “the father of lies”, is always seeking to worm his way into the

ears and hearts and minds of every one of us...every one of us, from the lowliest to those with great power and influence.

Therefore, we read, 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. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. I would paraphrase those words like this: Clothed in the powerful, protective presence of God the Father, listen carefully to your gut and to your heart. Protected by your always honest brother, Jesus, listen to your gut feelings about what is true or false. Listen to your heart, ever made new by the gentle Holy Spirit, to sense what is morally right or wrong, loving or hateful.

As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. Be ready to go to be with someone who is lonely or afraid. When I was serving as a bishop, I was blessed to know and deeply respect a retired, widowed, genuinely caring pastor living in South Haven who would frequently, I think weekly, bake a batch of pies and walk them, still warm, to his elderly neighbors. Even without words he with his hands and his feet joyfully proclaimed the gospel of peace to his cherished peers living out the last chapters of their earthly lives.

With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. As I too age, I am more deeply aware of how necessary it is for me to pray every single day for the gift of faith. It was always true that I needed to do that. It's just that now I recognize more clearly how vulnerable I am to the flaming arrows of despondency, of fear and anxiety, of ill-considered words, and of too quick, dismissive judgments of others. The shield of faith, this precious daily gift of faith, this trust in God's ever-present steadfast love for me and for my neighbors really does quench the evil one's arrows that would wound me, yes, wound all of us, with the bondage to despair, with an obsessive fear of others, with a chronic inability to accept and love and engage others as they are, as equally beloved children of God.

And then these words: *Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.* I think of a motorcycle accident just yards down the street from us just a few weeks ago. Though the young man on the bike was

seriously injured, most obviously with a broken leg and foot, he was still conscious. We all thought that if he had not been wearing a helmet, he'd likely have died or at least his brain would be irreparably damaged.

With half-truths and outright lies, the wily one can cause us to think wrongly about our world, our country, our neighbors, our congregation, our very selves. In our brains, perhaps especially in the frontal lobe, we may think, we may reason, we may conclude that the world is surely going to hell. Or we may conclude that only some, some who have the correct beliefs, or some who are most cunning, or some who are the wealthiest, or some who have the most power will be spared, they will be saved.

But with the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit we think differently. Jesus suffered and died and rose again for the whole world, to save all of creation. In our minds, protected by the helmet of salvation, we know all is not lost. With the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, we know, in the words of the psalmist, that "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit." We know that "The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned." We know in the words of the Old Testament prophet Joel that "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." We know in the words of St. Paul that "God is faithful, and will not let you be tested [tempted] beyond your strength, but with the testing he will provide a way out so that you may be able to endure it."

So, let us put on the whole armor of God, so that together we may be able to stand firm against the wiles of the devil, not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums but with Spirit-inspired, prayer-filled deeds of love and mercy!