

Pentecost 16B
Peace, Seattle
August 26, 2018
Ephesians 6:10-20

MEETING THE FORCES OF EVIL WITH THE POWER OF LOVE

One of the teachers at Holden Village when we were there in July was a pastor from Belfast, Northern Ireland, named Gary Mason.¹

Having served for 30 years during the long civil war between Catholics and Protestants that has plagued his country—THE TROUBLES—Gary had seen the results of violent acts first hand and he felt God's call to build his ministry around transformation, peace building, and reconciliation.

His goal during our sessions together was to create space for conversation around the profound, important, and difficult questions that often don't get asked in churches.

So Gary began by talking about the Psalms and Psalm 91 in particular: "You shall not fear the terror of night nor the arrow by day for under God's wings you will find refuge, and no harm shall come to you."

What does it mean to be under God's wings—God's protection and security—and how are we to understand this psalm, and others like it, when traumatic experiences lead us to question how or whether God truly is present.

Gary reminded us that songs of praise like these, which grow out of a genuine experience of deliverance, must be paired with the songs of lament and forsakenness like Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" – the psalm Jesus cried as he hung on the cross.

For when we're honest, we must own the fact that our lives, though marked with moments of joy, also meet up with the pervasive mystery of pain, death, suffering, and unanswered questions.

Gary shared experiences from his home in Northern Ireland where, he said, 800 years of bad theology had led people on both sides to the conviction that violence done in the name of God, in the name of blood and soil and cause, was not only to be tolerated—it was to be wholeheartedly embraced.

Then, citing the prophet Hosea's scathing critique of the violence in his day, Gary made the claim that violence in the name of God is never justified. That when we put our trust in militarism and the mystique of violence, there can be no resolution to conflict—social disintegration is the only inevitable result.

Helping his fellow citizens see the truth of this, exposing the bad theology that has served to justify death-dealing retribution, and engaging in endeavors that build bridges across these ancient divides has turned out to be Gary's life work.

And it's hard work, which takes creativity as well as dogged determination.

One example: Gary shared a story of how, during the height of the conflict in Belfast—where so-called PEACE WALLS up to 25 feet high were built to separate majority Protestant neighborhoods from majority Catholic neighborhoods—his organization received funding for a project called:

"The writing's not on the wall."

¹ You can read more about Gary and the non-profit organization RETHINKING CONFLICT that he founded in 2012 here: <http://www.rethinkingconflict.com/biography/>
You can also access recordings of his teaching sessions at Holden in 2017 and 2018 here: <http://audio.holdenvillage.org/node/17734>

Many of these dividing walls are covered in murals, and on those murals are the faces of people celebrated as heroes because of the violence they did to enemies on other side. This project was about replacing those images and messages with new ones.

Gary had the opportunity to design one of those replacements, and he chose for his design a portrait of CS Lewis—a native son of Belfast—and scenes from The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe.

After the project was complete, a somewhat cynical journalist came to Gary and asked:
DO YOU THINK REPAINTING THIS WALL WILL MAKE ANY BIT OF DIFFERENCE?

Gary said:

In this house here there's a six-year-old girl. Up until now, every day she's wakened and opened her curtains, her view has been of two men with balaclavas, dark clothing and AK-47s. Now when she opens her curtains she sees CS Lewis, Aslan the Lion, and a wardrobe. Do you think that might make a difference for her psychological well-being?

In today's reading from Ephesians it's instructive, I think, to remember that Paul writes from prison—a place which he's grown accustomed to spending time.

In his final admonitions to the Christians in Ephesus and the surrounding region, Paul reaches for an image that he hopes will find purchase with them. The image he settles on, ironically, is a military one: PUT ON THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD. But he reinterprets it for his purposes.

ARM YOURSELVES, he writes, NOT FOR A MILITARY BATTLE BUT FOR A SPIRITUAL ONE. FOR OUR STRUGGLE IS NOT AGAINST ENEMIES OF BLOOD AND FLESH BUT AGAINST THE RULERS, AUTHORITIES AND SPIRITUAL FORCES OF DARKNESS.

I can imagine Paul looking outside his jail cell at the guard who's keeping watch, or recalling the sight of detachments of Roman soldiers patrolling the cities and highways he's traveled during his long missionary journeys throughout the Empire.

But instead of using this image to promote a militant attitude Paul turns it:

- The BELT represents TRUTH
- The BREASTPLATE — JUSTICE
- THE SHIELD – TRUST IN GOD
- THE HELMET – THE SAVING GRACE AND SAFETY THAT GOD ALONE CAN PROVIDE.
- AND THE SHOES?

“WHATEVER MAKES YOU READY TO PROCLAIM GOOD NEWS OF PEACE.”

Where within this image, we ask, does power reside? In the armor? No.

BE STRONG IN THE LORD, IN THE STRENGTH OF HIS POWER, writes Paul.

Paul's admonition is not a pep rally for CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS GOING OFF TO WAR!

It's a reminder that the one to whom we are bound in baptism is the one who exercised his power chiefly by yielding it up.

“Though he was in the form of God he did not count equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself...and humbled himself in obedience to the point of death on a cross.”²

² Philippians 2:6-8, paraphrased.

HE IS OUR PEACE, Paul wrote in chapter 2, IN HIS FLESH HE HAS BROUGHT US—ENEMIES—TOGETHER. HE HAS BROKEN DOWN THE DIVIDING WALL OF HOSTILITY BETWEEN US, CREATING ONE NEW HUMANITY IN PLACE OF TWO, RECONCILING US ALL THROUGH THE CROSS.

This Christ invites you now to don armor NOT for the sake of conquering, but for the sake of defense against any dark force that would lure you into despair, apathy or entropy; any manifestation of evil that would turn your hearts of faith into hearts of stone.

We live in an increasingly weaponized culture. The games we play—the most popular ones anyway—are about doing away with the enemy, however “enemy” may be conceived. Some of the most talented young minds among us are recruited to create worlds that lead players to revel in the myriad methods available for eliminating THE ENEMY.

Our LANGUAGE has become weaponized, too. Insults and accusations are hurled like Molotov cocktails or twittered out without forethought. Virulent slurs lay bare ideologies of hate. Speech which demeans and dehumanizes the OTHER has become commonplace.

We are building back the very walls that Christ tore down and erecting murals that glorify the basest attributes of our history—and, in some cases, using GOD-LANGUAGE TO JUSTIFY IT.

Systemic violence against fellow human beings and the natural world is bearing us toward a future that will serve no one, save the forces of darkness.

These malevolent forces—however named—are as much a reality in our world as in the world Paul knew. Where does this evil come from? It’s an age-old question and a complex one.

Individuals make bad and self-serving decisions, yes; take bad actions that affect others, yes. We live our lives, as Luther said, curved in on ourselves.

But there’s also a structural component, a systemic and communal aspect to this downward slope.

“The self is never on its own,” writes Susan Grove Eastman, “but [is] always socially and cosmically constructed in relationship to external realities that operate internally as well.”³

Gary Mason spoke of centuries old, pervasive scripts in Northern Ireland that have pitted opposing groups against each other for generations, justifying the hate, the loathing and the dehumanization of the ENEMY.

We in the United States have our own demonic templates. The demon of racism—justified and perpetuated for centuries through the institution of slavery—still has it long sharp teeth sunk into the flesh of the body politic in our country. The venom persists; the consequences haunt us still.

This is the very kind of virulent “cosmic power” Paul is talking about in his letter. And there are others.

When someone is born into such a pervasive system it becomes their reality and they pass it on to others whether consciously or unconsciously. Racism begets racism, sexism sexism, violence violence; the demons have their way with us and escape can seem futile indeed.

³ Susan Grove Eastman, Paul and the Person. Cited by Alma Tinoco Ruiz in Living the Word, *Christian Century*, August 1, 2018. p. 21

But, dearly beloved, that is not the whole story. There is another story, a story the Scriptures call GOOD NEWS, of a Lord who loves us too much to leave us in the grip of these demons of darkness. It is the story of one who emptied himself of power in order to become one with us; in order to free us from our bonds and show us how to live.

This one, who gave himself for our redemption, his flesh and blood for our salvation, our healing, our wholeness, this “bread come down from heaven,” offers more to us than any pretender ever can.⁴

His power is expressed not through coercion but compassion, not through violence or fear but through a love so mature, so deep, so all encompassing that it casts out all fear.

Day after day our Savior Jesus calls us to be part of a community that will follow him on this Way. And he promises to walk beside us—to remain with us—come hell or highwater.

Jesus doesn’t sugarcoat our condition: we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. But he asks us to trust that we won’t be left in that bondage. That he’ll keep after us, stay beside us, work with us and within us until those shackles, whatever their origin, are gone.

His emptying of himself for the sake of us all, his breaking down the dividing walls that separate us from God, from creation, from one another, become models for how we are to live and move and act in the world—with our families, our congregations, our communities, yes, with our enemies.

It is this Christ whom we meet every time we come to this Table; yes, he’s here, without fail, bringing forgiveness and healing. And, friends, that’s just the beginning!

For as we take in his body and blood, you see, he gifts us with the strength and the desire to begin life anew—refusing hate, embracing love; loving God, loving our neighbor.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, in a world filled with hate, you call us not to destroy our enemies with violent acts or rhetoric, but to make them into friends through love. But it’s hard. And to be honest, sometimes we feel like walking away. But Lord, to whom else can we go? You have the words of eternal life. So keep us close to you when life challenges us, when conflicts tempt us, and remind us always that we belong to you, that your Way is the only way to a life that truly is Life. Amen.

⁴ Ibid.