

Choosing Our Battles

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Eagle River, Wisconsin

August 26, 2018

Dale L. Bishop

Text: Ephesians 6:10-20

The contemporary city of Nazareth is nestled in the hills that rise above the plain of Jezreel in northern Israel. Atop one of those hills, overlooking both the city and the plain that stretches below it is St. Margaret's Guest House, a modest pilgrims' hotel that was formerly an Episcopal orphanage for local Arab children. One evening, as we looked out from the veranda of the guest house, taking in the lights of the city and the darkened plain beyond, the Episcopal priest of Nazareth, a Palestinian, reminded me that the plain of Jezreel is believed to be the Biblical Megiddo. "Megiddo is the Armageddon of the Book of Revelation," he pointed out. "There is where the final battle between good and evil will take place, where the armies of Christ and the Antichrist will have it out. It will happen right down there. If you would like advance tickets to watch, we're raising money for the church, and I'd be happy to sell them to you at a discount," he told me with a big smile.

Today's sermon is not about the Book of Revelation, but speculation about the Book of Revelation has exercised a certain fascination for people who see the Bible as a coded roadmap for the future. Interpretations of Revelation, in fact, constitute a lucrative cottage industry for tele-evangelists who claim to be able to predict the future because they have a special insight into the book, and for publishers of popular potboilers about the rapture and the end time. These

forecasts of the apocalypse inevitably revolve around Armageddon, the climactic violent clash between those armies of good and evil. Identifying the villains, the army of evil, has been complicated, because history has a way of intervening. The villains keep changing. For many years, the villains were assumed to be the evil empire of communism; in more recent times, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the rise of Islamic extremism, the role of villain has gone to our successor enemy, Islam. But if identifying the villains has been made complicated by historical events, identifying the good guys in these scenarios is easy. We are the good guys.

Using the Bible as a cosmic almanac, as a way of predicting the future has a long and bumpy history. It's a very inexact science. History is full of accounts of people who read all the signs, who were sure that they had cracked the code, people who abandoned their homes to wait for Armageddon and the Second Coming on remote hilltops or in deserts, only to end up slinking home with a sheepish, "Never mind." The bearded guy on the street corner with his sign saying, "The end is near," has become a kind of comic staple for cartoonists.

And quite apart from the miserable track record of those who have tried to read the Bible in this way, such a use of the Bible distorts both the role of the Bible and its central message. The Bible is not a horoscope; it's a conversation with the past and it's a challenge for the future. It doesn't tell us what will happen; it reminds us that our behavior has consequences. Most of all, it tells us how we should worship and honor God, and how we should treat one another.

This is where today's passage from Ephesians comes in. Paul's letter to the Ephesians was written in a particular historical and a particular theological context, a context that was very different from ours. But understanding that context may help us to uncover the book's continuing relevance for us, its ability

to speak to us. Today's passage already tells us a lot about the historical context. It was a context of expectation of the Second Coming, which did involve Jesus' conquest of sin and evil; and it was a context in which the imagery of soldiers and battles was a part of everyday life. "Put on the whole armor of God," verse 11 says, and what follows is a kind of catalogue of what the well-equipped soldier should wear: a belt, a breastplate, military shoes, a shield, a helmet and a sword.

The problem is that this is not a listing of what a Christian soldier should wear; it's a listing of what Roman soldiers *did* wear. There were, in fact, no Christian soldiers, because the early Christians refused to fight. They were pacifists. One of the great Christian fathers, Tertullian, wrote, "Only without the sword can the Christian wage war: for the Lord has abolished the sword." In fact, it was their refusal to serve as soldiers for the empire, and not their beliefs per se, that put members of the early Christian church at odds with a whole series of Roman emperors. The Romans didn't care what the Christians believed—there were all kinds of religions in the Roman Empire whose adherents were allowed to live and worship in peace as long as they didn't rock the boat, as long as they didn't defy the emperor. It was their refusal to worship the emperor, and to follow his decrees, and not their speculations about God, that led to Christians being thrown to the lions, or burned at the stake, or, like St. Peter, being crucified.

So there's a heavy dollop of irony in Paul's call to members of the early church to "put on the whole armor of God." Christians simply would not, and could not, don the armor of a Roman soldier. Using that armor imagery was, in fact, a way of saying that all of those Roman soldiers—and they were an all-too-familiar presence for people in the early church—all those Roman soldiers with their shields and swords and breastplates, with their helmets and military shoes—all those Roman soldiers were dressed for the wrong battle. For Christians, Paul tells us, the real battle is not the battle between the armies of the night; it's not a battle

with enemies of flesh and blood, to be settled on the plain of Armageddon or anywhere else. The real battle is the battle, the ongoing battle, against the spiritual forces of evil, an evil so potent that it is even to be found in the heavenly places.

We have, in our church, tended to avoid battle imagery. We don't sing "Onward, Christian Soldiers," very often, for example. But there are battles to be fought. They're just not neatly arrayed like the forces in a game of Risk. Let me suggest a few, and then I'd challenge you to think about others, perhaps as a spiritual discipline. Some battles we have in common; we share them as people who live in this time and place. And there are some battles that are very personal, peculiar to ourselves, yet not unique because, because while I believe in original sin, I've also concluded that there are no original sins.

One of those personal battles might be the battle against addiction. We're all most likely addicted to something, but there are some addictions that are particularly destructive and particularly intractable. If you know someone who is an alcoholic, for example, and who has chosen to battle their alcoholism rather than simply to let it have its way with their life, you will know how heroic that battle is. The enemy is always there, lurking, seeking to lure that warrior with the promise of the seductive, "What can be wrong with just that one drink." Or, "Here, you deserve this." I admire, more than I can adequately express in words, people who put on the armor of God and struggle with alcoholism every day of their lives. These people don't have an array of medals to display on their uniforms, only the inner knowledge of the accumulation of every "One day at a time" that has enabled them to reclaim their lives. Only they know the struggles they've experienced; only they know how fierce the battle can be. And the armor for that battle can only be described as spiritual armor.

And then there are battles that we share because we live here and now: the battle for truth in a time when the very existence of truth is called into question, when what matters is not what is said but who says it, when the cult of the individual has overwhelmed any sense of common values or common humanity.

And there is the battle for the integrity of the soul. There are powerful forces that seek to define us, to categorize us by our consumer habits or by our politics. We're neatly sorted out and packaged, so that we can be used. Click on to something on a website that you're interested in buying, and see how you are followed on other websites by those invisible powers that seek to manipulate us.

The evil we battle can be very personal—like love, evil is most potent when it appears in human form—but we should never make the mistake of personalizing evil. When we do that, we run the great risk of seeing evil as something entirely outside of us. There is evil outside of us, to be sure, but the evil we can most readily do something about is what is already present in us. We can see our tendency to look for easy enemies outside of us in the way the church, over the years, stereotyped and eventually dehumanized the Jews, seeing in them the very image of Satan.

Antisemitism is not dead, and we still have our contemporary equivalents in the popular identification of Islam as an evil religion, and of Muslims as the very embodiment of evil, as Satan incarnate. All of the Armageddon scenarios that exercise such fascination among many Christians these days envision battles of flesh and blood, armor against armor, confrontations of Christians and Muslims. They miss the message, and the irony, of Paul's insistence that the armor of Christians is always a spiritual armor: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit. This is, after all, the only armor we need, if only we trust in it.

In the end, our battle is not with Muslims or communists, or any other category of people. Our most profound struggle is our internal struggle with evil. And that's why the armor that God provides us for that battle is not the armor of the Roman soldier, or, for that matter, of any other soldier. The armor that God provides us is spiritual armor against our most potent enemy, the devil that is within us. As Pogo put it, "We have met the enemy, and it is us."

So let us put on the whole armor of God. Let us confront the untruth that assails us from all quarters with the truth of God, the truth that reminds us that we are all, equally, God's children. Let us put on the breastplate of righteousness, confronting injustice wherever and whenever we encounter it, even and especially in ourselves, when we conduct our lives as if we are more important than others. Let us live out the gospel of peace. We should be, in our very selves, the place where God and humanity are reconciled, where the peace of Christ is incarnate in our very beings.

We should follow Jesus. Let us live lives of faith, seeing our faith not as constriction by religious doctrine, but as the blessed freedom that Christ gives us so that we can love extravagantly, outside the doctrinal box, with our whole being—body and soul. Let us live in the sure knowledge that our faith has made us whole, that like the people of faith whose healing Jesus witnessed and blessed, we may be saved, restored to the fullness of life that God wants for all of us. Let us be filled with the Spirit that sustains us, that brings us together in Christ's church.

Let us choose our battles wisely, relying on the strength of the Lord. For our strength comes from God, and from God alone.

Amen.