

At the close of Book 19 of *The Iliad*, the Greek poet Homer's epic tale of the Trojan War, the fierce warrior Achilles puts on his armor, finally ready to enter the fight. In the previous chapter, Homer spent 130 lines of dense, rich poetry describing the details of shield that Hephaestus, the god of blacksmiths, had forged for Achilles to avenge the death of his friend Patroclus. He now paints an almost-cinematic picture as Achilles carefully dons it and the rest of his divine weaponry: the silver greaves and ankle-pieces; the corselet about his chest; the silver-studded sword of bronze he straps onto his shoulders; "the shield, great and sturdy, wherefrom went forth afar a gleam as of the moon;" the mighty helmet which "shone as a star" with a crest of horse-hair and around it plumes of gold. Finally dressed for war, Homer says "goodly Achilles made proof of himself in his armor...his glorious limbs moved free, and it became as it were wings to him, and lifted up the shepherd of the people." It is stirring—moving. You can almost hear the soundtrack playing in the background to match the drama on the page. Countless other stories and movies have mimicked it as the hero deliberately, almost reverently prepares to battle his foes.

In today's Epistle, when St. Paul exhorts the Christians in Ephesus to "put on the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:11)," we might think that Paul is telling each of us individually to become a Christian Achilles who fights evil with spiritual tools that each one of us must learn how to master. Clad in magical armor, engaged in a battle with social injustice or personal vice, we might think that Paul is telling us, in the words of David Bowie, "we can be heroes, just for one day." It is true that St. Paul's audience is Greek and would know all about *The Iliad*; it is true that Ephesus is not far from the actual site of the legendary Troy; and it is true that Paul is classically educated and would be familiar with Greek and Roman epic stories and symbols. However, as familiar as St. Paul is with contemporary pagan culture, he like the early Church is fundamentally Jewish. His identity is rooted in the

Hebrew Scriptures from which the Epistle's martial imagery actually comes; unsurprisingly, it carries a very different message than the classic pagan epics.

Discussing "the whole armor of God" that we are to put on, St. Paul lists five elements. He tells us to "Fasten the belt of truth around your waist," "Put on the breastplate of righteousness," "Take the shield of faith," "the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:14-17)." The purpose of these things is "to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one (6:16)" so that we "may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm (6:14)" Here is the problem: if we understand this armor and these weapons to be tools that we take up by ourselves and put on by ourselves to "quench," "preach," and "stand" by ourselves, we are doomed to failure and disappointment. A Gospel of heroic self-reliance, self-protection, and self-improvement is a false gospel; it is devoid of our constant, fundamental, and total need for God. If we know anything about ourselves, we know that we cannot do anything good, much less heroic, for our society or for ourselves on our own. St. Paul knew this, too. He was the one who wrote, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do (Romans 7:19)." Even when we discern a good thing that we want to do, and even when we set out to do it, we continually find ourselves so consistently tripping over our ego needs, our emotional neuroses, our physical weakness, and our overall self-centeredness that we often sabotage our efforts to do or to be good. And if we don't understand this about ourselves, then we are even more lost in ourselves. Don't get me wrong: it is good, when the time is right for us, to take on certain changes in our life that will bring us closer to health and sanity: regular prayer, regular reading of Scripture, regular acts of service, regular acts of generosity and self-denial. But the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John which tell us about the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ are not self-help manuals.

When St. Paul writes about putting on the armor of God, he is quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah who foretold the arrival of the Messiah, the long-anticipated, God-promised Savior of the world. Speaking of the Messiah, Isaiah says, “Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins (Isa. 11:5).” In other words, the “belt of truth” that Paul describes is a part of the Messiah’s spiritual armor; not ours. Foreseeing a time when truth would be absent and justice corrupt, Isaiah says that the Messiah would “put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head [...] and come to Zion as Redeemer (Isa. 59:17, 20).” The breastplate of righteousness and helmet of salvation that St. Paul describes are parts of the armor of God that the Messiah wears—not us—as He works to restore truth and justice. Therefore, the armor of God is not something that we put on by ourselves to fight our own battles on our own; it is what God has put on Christ, the Messiah of the world. When St. Paul exhorts us to put on the armor of God, he describes our need to put on Christ: to be wrapped, enclosed, and defended by the Holy One who is our only hero, champion, and Redeemer. The question, then, is how do we put on Christ, who is our armor?

In this epistle, the word “you” Paul uses is plural, not singular. I am from California, but I have learned that in the South we call this “y’all.” He does not address each individual Ephesian; he addresses all of them—and all of us—as the whole Church. It is true that we are called to a personal relationship with God in Christ, but “personal” does not mean merely “individual.” There is no such thing as an individual Christian—only an interpersonal one. The Greek word Paul uses for “church” is *ecclesia*; it comes from Greek politics. Whenever the citizens of a Greek city-state gathered, it was called an *ecclesia*: an “assembly,” a “gathering.” Our identity—our true identity—is not found in ourselves by ourselves but in relationship with each other as founded, bonded, inspired, and sustained by Christ. Only as a collective gathering in Christ here on Sundays do we find the strength we need to stand

firm, trusting in the grace, absolution, and promise of eternal life that we as the Body of Christ have received.

A few years ago, I visited the Abbey of Our Lady of Le Bec, an 11<sup>th</sup> century Benedictine community of monks and nuns northwest of Paris in Normandy. There I visited Sister Sarah, a French nun who had come to the United States earlier in the year to lead our clergy silent retreat at Sewanee. I do not mind telling you that I was having a difficult time: not just one but several people who were dear to me had been hurt by circumstances that were completely out of their control. I felt hurt, sad, and angry; I did not doubt God, but did occasionally doubt that God would give me the grace to help in the ways that were needed. Sister Sarah and I had talked about these things. As we walked toward the chapel for the convent's noonday worship, she told me, in her halting English, "This is why I am here with my sisters. When I feel I cannot pray, I come to be with them, and their prayers carry me."

Everyone in this room, in some way or another, whether we ourselves or someone we love, is locked in a life-or-death struggle: money, health, conflict, addiction, loneliness or loss of personal meaning. St. Paul proclaims: "In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Romans 8:37.)" When we remember Whose we are, we realize who we are: not superheroes, but children—children of God bound together by Him in one divine Family. Spiritual armor and weaponry are not things we work to master; being one with Christ and through Him with one another, we are already fully equipped. We are here to be dressed in Christ with mystical, sacramental fabric. The armor of God is our baptismal gown, woven by God, and it is stronger and more luminous than any shield we can imagine. Blanketed in Him, we stand firm.