

The Battle for Peace
Eph. 6:10-20
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You probably watched the video, and I'm guessing you were as horrified as I was. A group of armed soldiers march down the center aisle of the church while a character representing the devil lies on the steps of the altar. While a group of children chant, "Take him out, blow him up," the soldiers "open fire" on the devil for several seconds, then drag him outside through a side door. The pastor starts counting, and at the eight-second mark an explosion can be heard followed by loud cheers from the children.

This scene took place this summer at a Lexington church and gained nationwide attention for the simulated violence. I never thought we'd have to clarify that our VBS was "murder-free," but here we are. And yet, is what took place at that church that far off from what Paul tells us in Ephesians? He says, "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." When challenged about the actions in the video, the church's pastor said, "Maybe you're right, maybe we're wrong, but understand, we're painting a real picture to kids, visibly what's going on invisibly." Paul says, "For our struggle is not against 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." In other words, the invisible. We know we're at war as a nation, but are we at war as followers of Christ? History would tell us that the church thinks so, from the Crusades to hymns like "Onward, Christian Soldiers." Paul's words here are almost as disturbing as the video.

So, let's see if we can make sense of them, starting with the context. When Paul calls himself an ambassador in chains, he's not just whistling Dixie. Paul wrote this letter to the church in Ephesus from a jail cell in Rome, where he was being held for preaching about a resurrected King, which you can imagine didn't make the Roman emperor too happy. It's a good bet that his armor imagery came from the fact that he was guarded around the clock by a Roman soldier. He only had to look outside his cell at the soldier guarding him to find a good metaphor for living a life of faith.

Ephesus was one of Paul's favorite stops. The church was doing great, but Paul, always the teacher, couldn't write a letter without at least one word of warning for these people he loved so much. Paul tells the Ephesians they need to be on the lookout for the enemy. He tells them to put on the whole armor of God, to suit up for battle, to get ready to move to the front lines. There's not a more powerful statement in his letter than the first verse of our passage: "Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power." Strong, mighty, power. Is this the Bible or the battlefield speech from "Braveheart?" The Greek word is the same for all three of those words and can be translated this way: "Be a dynamo in the Lord and use his dynamic dynamite." It's not a huge leap from that to picking up a gun to shoot whatever devil is in your line of sight.

The devil...powers of the dark world...spiritual forces of evil. How do these words strike you? For some, it sounds more like a "Lord of the Rings" movie than actual reality. They might sound archaic, superstitious, even paranoid. In Paul's time, folks strongly believed in the presence of evil spirits, which filled the air and did people harm. When you lack the medical understanding of physical and mental illness, a lot can be

blamed on evil spirits. But in our day of real-life monsters whose faces fill up the evening news, Paul sounds like he's warning us against something quaint like the Boogeyman. In one translation Paul calls this evil presence "the diabolical one." I can just see the devil twisting his handlebar mustache and letting out an evil laugh.

And yet...when you look at our world today, it's almost impossible to deny the existence of evil, something bigger than any human being that is constantly at work to tear us down and keep us divided. I think we talk about a "devil" as a way to personify this evil, whether or not an actual devil exists. But I believe there's something out there that goes beyond the mere sinfulness of humanity. I believe there is something at work in this world that seeks to separate us from God, that seeks to disrupt our relationship with Christ, that seeks to destroy the peace we are called to pray and work for.

It's easy to compartmentalize these forces, to dismiss them as only working on a global scale, like the Holocaust or slavery, but I believe they are also work on us in small ways, as well. Every day we face decisions between good and evil. Someone once wrote, "In the war of right and wrong, we can't afford to be neutral." And so we are forced to choose, to take sides. Are we tempted to choose things that bring pleasure, or wealth, or convenience, at the expense of our righteousness? One little lie won't hurt, will it? These numbers don't have to add up exactly, do they? This rumor is too juicy not to pass on, isn't it? No one will find out, will they? Those may feel like no big deal, but every decision counts, because every time we choose to compromise our integrity, every time we choose against what is right, every time we side with the "evil forces of the spiritual realm," we choose to separate ourselves further from God.

That's sin: anything that separates us from God. God wants nothing more than to be close to us, and sin is what keeps us apart from God. The further we are from God, the less loved we feel, the less important our faith is to us, the less worthy we believe we are, the more vulnerable we become to the diabolical one. And the less peace we have in our lives and in our world.

And we all want peace, don't we? I wish faith in Jesus insulated us from conflict and strife. But the truth is the death and resurrection of Jesus doesn't usher the church into some utopian state; in fact, just the opposite. In his brilliant book "Southernmost," Lexingtonian author Silas House writes about a Pentecostal small town pastor who must confront the homophobia in his church when two gay men move into town. The book starts in the middle of a raging flood that threatens to decimate the town, forcing the pastor and the reader to navigate both physical and existential threats, a foreshadowing of the flood of criticism the pastor will face when he provides shelter from the storm for the same-sex couple.

To me, that's what faith in Jesus does. We're not given a soft pillow and a cushy blanket when we say, "Jesus is our Lord." Instead, we are thrust right into the middle of the tempest, the struggle between good and evil, justice and injustice, freedom and oppression, peace and conflict. Paul says we are all called to join the battle for peace and we have what God has given us, God's dynamic dynamite, God's mighty power. And it is up to us to use it. We are called to act, because the battle for peace isn't passive. We can't just sit back and not do bad things and think we've contributed something. We have to be intentional about living out our faith in ways that make God's peace real here on earth. Peace isn't going to come to us if we remain neutral. We have to fight for it, surrounding

ourselves with God's grace and choosing to be peacemakers in a conflicted and confrontational world.

Notice that Paul mentions six weapons, but only one of them is an offensive weapon: the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. The other five are for defense only. In the movie "The Karate Kid," Daniel tells Mr. Miagi that he wants to learn karate so that he can get revenge against the Cobra Kai. But Mr. Miagi teaches Daniel things like how to "wax on, wax off" and "paint the fence" and "side to side." Daniel is basically doing all the chores he's been trying to get out of at home. And then he discovers that all those boring little movements were preparing him for the fight, which is actually a pretty good description of growing our faith. We spend our lives thinking we're just learning how to be patient, to tell the truth, to forgive people, to love our neighbors. And then life punches us in the face and we have to figure out how to respond. The fight we are fighting does not call for acts of aggression but acts of resistance.

Paul tells us that such simple things as living with integrity and speaking up for justice and being peaceful can be dynamic weapons of defense against the dark forces of the spiritual realm. Mr. Miagi doesn't teach Daniel to karate chop his way through life, but he prepares him to defend himself when the time comes. Four times in this passage Paul tells us the same thing. "Stand firm." Notice Paul never says, "Go out and shoot the devil." He says, "Stand firm." Not "stand firm-ish." Not "stand firm when it's convenient." Not "stand firm unless someone posts something annoying about you on Facebook." Stand firm.

Stand firm when the forces of evil are at work in your life. Stand firm when you are tempted to do something you know you shouldn't. Stand firm when choosing between the easy way and the right way. Stand firm when telling the truth will cause you more hardship than telling a lie. Stand firm when acknowledging your faith will be more embarrassing than hiding it. Stand firm when fighting for peace is more costly than staying on the sidelines. Stand firm against anything that will separate you from God.

The battle for peace continues. The diabolical one is at work all around us. We can't win this by ourselves. We need the dynamic dynamite of God, we need to fight from our knees, praying for the Prince of Peace to reign in our hearts and in our world. This world needs to know that the peace of Christ isn't about who has the most missiles or who can shoot the most bullets into the devil. This world needs to know that peace looks like being the people God has called us to be, the meek, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. Stand firm.