

Peace Filled Service

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Ephesians 6:10-20

Today we are being invited to recommit to our covenant relationship with God. Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel together and invited the leaders and the people to make a choice. Choose whom you will serve. Coming to worship every Sunday is a choice. It is a choice to serve God. Every week, when we are here, when we live our faith, we are making that very choice. When a person chooses to be baptized, or chooses to baptize their child, we are again part of a choice to serve God. All the scriptures this summer have been reminding us to put God at the forefront of our lives. We're being invited yet again to be God-centred. Today is no exception. Paul is inviting the Ephesians to choose God, and to do this by putting on the whole armour of God. A belt of truth around your waist, a breastplate of righteousness. And shoes on your feet that will proclaim the Gospel of Peace. According to Paul, God has given us a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation and a sword of the Spirit. But what does this all mean?

I've always personally struggled with the imagery of spiritual warfare. The idea that Christians are called to fight the good fight against evil was not something that I had been brought up with in the church, although I had many friends from a more conservative background that were. All too often, in the history of Christianity, the notion of warfare against spiritual forces has been shifted to justify wars against particular others. But like all passages in the Bible, we need to read them in the context in which they were actually written. The Ephesians, to whom Paul was writing this letter, were religious minorities in the Roman Empire. According to my readings this week, Christianity was actually illegal until 313. In the Roman Empire, you served the Roman Emperor. Paul, I think, used the imagery of a Roman soldier in this letter to help the Ephesian people understand what it means to be Christian. Paul did not want the people of Ephesia to conform to the popular culture; to serve the Roman Emperor. Paul, like Joshua, is inviting the people to make their own choice. To use their own free will to determine who they will follow.

Choosing to follow God is truly a commitment. It's an invitation to live a life that is often counter-cultural. It's not an easy path – it's actually, I think, the harder path, especially in a world that is very secular. Paul was inviting people to shed their pagan selves, and instead to live as Christ wanted them. As Christ taught us. In a spirit of love; in a spirit of forgiveness and thankfulness. We too are being called to live in love, forgiveness, and thankfulness ourselves. In my reading of the scriptures, I found myself wondering what my shoes would look like if I were wearing shoes that were ready to proclaim the Gospel of Peace. I was thinking about it: high heels? Probably not the best choice. Hiking boots are not a bad choice. Flip-flops, they're casual, but they would cause problems, and I would probably trip.

But throughout my life, I had actually been condemned for some of my footwear choices. I've also been praised for some of them; I know this sounds odd. I was once faced with a formal complaint to the board after officiating at my very first wedding, because I wore open-toed shoes. Very serious – apparently this wasn't appropriate. And honestly, my response was, "If you're looking at my toes, you're looking at the wrong thing." I have had other people during my time in ministries explain that moccasins, which were my preferred choice in my twenties, were not appropriate shoes to be wearing when leading worship. And I thought, "Why not?" "Well, you shouldn't wear slippers to church, you know." This all reminded me of a scene from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, where Indy was asked to choose a chalice by the knight that guarded the Holy Grail. "Choose wisely," said the knight. It was not the most ornate, golden-with-glitters-and-jewels-on-it chalice that was the right one. It was the humblest, simplest chalice that was the one that was the right choice. The shoes that proclaim the Gospel of Peace are shoes that do not trample on others. That are not used to kick people or cause harm. The shoes that proclaim the Gospel of Peace are the ones that allow you to walk softly and support you when you stand firm in your convictions according to what God's taught us.

When we choose to serve God, we are committing to a covenant relationship with God. God makes covenants with groups so that individuals and relationships will be held accountable to grow and to be better within the group, so that life together can have a positive effect on the wider culture and the world. That's what we're being called to. We're being called to be in relationship with one another and to hold one another to living out love, forgiveness, and thankfulness. By putting on the armour of God, we are choosing to act and live in peace with one another. We are choosing to stand up for justice and equity for all people. We are choosing to live with compassion while seeking peace and understanding, and ultimately a world that loves one another unconditionally. In the liturgy of baptism today, we proclaim by "baptism by water in the name of the Holy Trinity is the means by which we are received at any age into the covenanted community of the church. It is the ritual that signifies our rebirth in faith and the cleansing power of God"¹. God has the power to forgive us and to give us a fresh start. A new look, a new lease on life. If we have been bitter, if we have been angry, God is offering us a different way. A way where we can feel love, acceptance, where we know we will belong.

As we all know, living unconditionally in love with one another is not always an easy task. The truth of the matter is that we often disappoint each other. We don't always see eye-to-eye. So how do we hold fast to this covenant? How do we stand firm in the ways of God and hold fast to what our faith teaches without condemning others or casting judgement on others? Paul explains that we need to focus our hearts and minds on God – we need to be God-centred. Our Sabbath practices, which we talked about in July, teach us that we do this through prayer. When we silence our minds and the voices of our culture that lead us to do things that harm others...instead of listening to God, we are led down the path that is not righteous. When we listen to God, we are reminded that even in our anger, we are reminded even in our disappointment of others, that we are not called to seek revenge. We are called to forgive. Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, which I personally prefer, invites faithful people to clothe themselves in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. I can accept this imagery much better than a

¹ *A Song of Faith*, The United Church of Canada Creedal Statement 2006.

breastplate of righteousness and a sword of the Spirit. The sword that Paul invites the Ephesians to pick up is actually the Word of God. And the Word of God is love. The Word of God made flesh is Jesus, and Jesus walked on this earth in peace. Jesus' superpower was love. I was thinking about how we can live in love, and the difference that makes instead of living in anger. I was once in a relationship many, many, many years ago, where the person I was with at the time had come from a family where yelling was expected in order to get what you wanted. I remember the first time we had an argument, which has never happened. And he just blew up. The power of silence is very good. I stood there, not knowing what to do, because this was not how my family dealt with conflict. We tended to go to our corners in silence and wait and talk about it afterwards. So I sat there staring at him as he yelled, and he decided he had to leave, and I remember being completely shocked, like, "What is going on and what happened here?" But by not engaging in the argument, all of his steam was gone. He left for a while and then came back, and then he remembered what was really important: that in that moment we loved one another, and that what he was saying was coming from him and had nothing to do with me. I have found over the years that standing in the face of people who are angry or who are upset because of something I had done or said according to them, that the best thing to do is to affirm them. Tell them what they do that you appreciate. Don't name-call, don't get sucked into arguing to make your point or to be the better person in that moment, but instead to compliment them and see the God in them. When we put on this armour of righteousness, we are being reminded not to seek revenge. We are being reminded not to be mean, but instead we are clothed in kindness and compassion. I wonder, when has your faith given you strength to stand up in the face of injustice, oppression, disappointment and anger? God provides us with all we need in order to live in love and in justice. I hope as we continue this summer and into the fall, that we remember that imitating Christ is a call to be in a relationship with God where we center our thoughts and actions on what God would want us to do in this world. Let us serve this world in peace and in love. Thanks be to God. Amen.