

“Extinguishing Flaming Arrows”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

As an undergrad, moving from New Jersey to the outskirts of Boston involved rethinking some lessons I had learned earlier. One of these didn't become clear until my junior year, when I arrived back on campus in January with my first car, a 1963 Plymouth Fury. My boyfriend at the time resembled my mother the first time we drove into Boston with me at the wheel. His right foot pounded on the invisible and therefore completely ineffective brake *on the passenger side* each time that I would enter into a crossroad on the green light without twice checking to see which cars in opposing traffic were running through the red. More significantly, in teaching me to be a Boston driver, he explained that *I* should be the one using the yellow to accelerate, and when merging into traffic to be sure to beat the cars in the lane I was entering. In short, he said what a basketball coach had said years earlier: “the key to a good defense is a good offense.” That, he said, is the rule of Boston driving.

While we may laugh about this kind of attitude toward the geography of driving habits, the way that we arm ourselves, either defensively or offensively, has much to do with what we first learn is important, and which lessons about behavior and ethical stance we choose to embrace lifelong. Unfortunately, the language of warfare is as familiar to us now as it was to those who listened to Paul writing from jail to the church at Ephesus. It is easy to get a little confused in our understanding if we think of donning armor as *primarily* an offensive posture rather than a defensive one.

Putting on God's full armor, as Paul calls it, is like being well protected defensively, for sure. And this is not chain mail, with holes in it waiting for a very crafty evil to find its way in somehow. A Christian is defended by the very presence of God, writes a blogger, J Ferguson, summarizing this way: “A Christian

must be armed with the very presence of God, the whole armor of God – truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, prayer in the Spirit to live in non-violent confrontation with the powers of the Empire. The God known through Jesus the Christ conquered the powers of the world that wrought evil-doing through love.”

As much as our defensive position against evil is definitely not only chain mail, we take the offensive with a mighty weapon of sorts in our battle against the evil powers of the world and against the individual temptations that might sway us. This is definitely not a sword, but is the powerful word of God, with which we not only defend ourselves with truth, righteousness, peace and the like, but also reach out with the Word of God, sharing openly with others the love of Christ, which is the only thing that might break through the counter armor and weaponry of hatred. Eric Smith can help us to understand just what are the “powers” against which we battle, and as he prefers the King James version of this passage, also what are referred to as the “principalities.” Smith was, for a time, Visiting Assistant Professor of the History of Christianity and New Testament Studies at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, CO, and Teaching Minister at First Plymouth Congregational Church in Englewood, CO. He reminds us, “The author isn’t advocating an invasion here. This is simply a call to be prepared for the assaults that the powers and principalities will bring. . . . The corrupt powers of this earth are corrupt insofar as they participate in a greater cosmic brokenness. Or, to put it the other way around, the powers of evil in the cosmos do their work through people and institutions that are far more earthly.

. . . The *people* in a given system might not be evil; the average local Roman magistrate probably was a decent guy who went home to his family every night. But when acting within a system, people take on the role of “rulers of the darkness of this world.” It’s significant that Ephesians here is talking about “powers and principalities,” in the language of the KJV, and not bad people. *Systems* are the place where evil gets into the works. *Systems* are the conduits of cosmic brokenness.”

Here endeth the words of Smith. Conduits of cosmic brokenness. That's it, really. Individuals can only do so much evil, but when connected through systems, through conduits of destruction, greater evils often spread out beyond what individual armor can withstand. Still, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that," and so, our offensive weapon of God's word enters into the action when we act in love; act in peace and reconciliation.

I have been sitting with what light and love look like in the face of the recurrent rise to dominance of the Taliban in Afghanistan. I have been sitting with the idea of twenty years of U.S. intervention, of war in which too many lives have been lost and other lives unutterably altered, now by some measures for "nothing," as some would say. I know that with the chaos and the violence in Kabul and elsewhere, we will continue to be, at minimum, spectators of a struggle among different powers, small c, and a real sense of the Powers and Principalities, large P, about which Paul writes. I keep hearing Pete Seeger's voice in my head, "Ain't gonna study war no more, ain't gonna study war no more." But we have been and we continue to see an understanding of the rule of the Earth to be too often domination rather than diplomacy. To be control rather than of love. So, what might love look like in the face of violence and the reality of governmental shifts and surges, of governmental control that looks a lot like hate?

It was my privilege to teach a course in non-violent revolution while at Blair. I know that I have mentioned it before. One of my discoveries in doing so was the life's work of a man named Gene Sharp, who died only in January of 2018 at 90 years old. As the founder of the Albert Einstein Institution, Sharp dedicated his life to the study of nonviolent action. For the sake of brevity in introducing his ideas, I asked a summary of Wikipedia: In Sharp's book, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, a "three-volume classic on civil disobedience," he provides a pragmatic political analysis of nonviolent action as a method for applying power in a conflict. Sharp's key theme is that power is not monolithic; that is, it does not

derive from some intrinsic quality of those who are in power. For Sharp, political power, the power of any state – regardless of its particular structural organization – ultimately derives from the subjects of the state. His fundamental belief is that any power structure relies upon the subjects' obedience to the orders of the ruler(s). If subjects do not obey, rulers have no power.

We have spent twenty years teaching the tactics of war, and I wonder what it can mean in Afghanistan and elsewhere if we teach the tactics of nonviolent action most demonstrably embodied by Jesus and taught by Paul as God's own armor. What does Jesus— and Sharp and Gandhi and Thoreau and King teach us about the *ultimate* power of nonviolent resistance, when we consider our lives as part of eternity and our spirits, our souls, as belonging not only to this life, but also to God's plan for the whole world, eternally? I would love to begin an exploration, a study of what clothing ourselves in this way will be. Then, how do we support others who enact a love of neighbor even in the midst of armed conflict and help to ensure that the Powers are not given the tools they need to bring further destruction? Would you like to read Sharp with me, and discuss how it is our grounding in faith in a loving God that leads our response? Let's talk about it.

Violent insurrection and war are not the only evils in the world—not by a long shot. That so many persons worldwide live in fear for their safety in the face of violence and live in hunger in the face of the potent potential for food production to meet everyone's needs is beyond disturbing. It should be a call to action, to readying ourselves with the power of the Holy Spirit to conquer the evils of want and fear. As we look *to*—instead of *at* the needs of our neighbors in Haiti for starters, it is my prayer that we will be armed with the light of God's truth in Jesus Christ, and that we will continue to serve in His name. I think of our children, and consider what better armor might we give them against the difficulties and darkness that life presents than to make *them* the carriers of justice and peace. Thanks be to God who brings us together and then sends us out in Christ's name. Amen.

Ephesians 6:10-20

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

¹⁹Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should."