

# **Remembering Nine-Eleven: Putting on the Whole Armor of God**

A Sermon Preached at Hanover Street Presbyterian Church

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Texts:

## **Exodus 12: 1-14**

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two door posts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every first born in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

## **Romans 13: 8-12**

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

### **Ephesians 6: 10-18**

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of 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. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

September the eleventh is coming. As we approach that anniversary, recalling a day of infamy and tragedy, I will preach to mourn all those who died, those who were killed, and those who did the killing. Some Americans may gasp to hear me say that I grieve for the killers, too. But, what do you think, church? When a child so depressed takes a rifle into school and mows down anyone in sight, does God hurt just for the ones he killed, or for him, too? In Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, God is that father who keeps loving his sinning son all the while he is still sinning. I believe God grieves over all who died last September eleventh; and I will therefore try not to let my righteous anger keep me from recognizing God's love for all the children whom God brings into the world.

I will also preach this morning to answer a question from one of you last Sunday who said: "I don't think pre-emptive violence is the right way to go either. Thanks for saying what's been on my heart. But, Tom, you didn't say enough about the alternative. What can we Americans do in the way of pre-emptive good?" My sermon answers that question. It's entitled: "Remembering Nine Eleven: Putting on the whole armor of God."

Our Exodus text this morning recalls the Passover, when Jews remember their liberation by God's awesome Spirit, who slew the first born of Egypt with plague, but passed over their own houses. Each year Jews remember the trauma and relief of that terrible time: the haste with which they fled (loins girded, staffs in hand), the uncertainty of their fate, and finally, the joy of their liberation.

If you have ever celebrated a Seder meal with Jewish friends you may recall that part of the ceremony mentions the victims of God's punishing plagues--sympathetically mentions them. Celebrants recall the suffering of their

enemies, as well as their own. If only that spirit of compassion for enemies might prevail today, as another people, we the American people, prepare to celebrate what will no doubt become an annual remembrance of trauma and survival.

In this morning's reading from Romans, Paul reminds his Jewish compatriots that all of God's law can be summed up in one commandment: "You must love your neighbor as yourself." Christians throughout the Roman Empire were not uniformly setting that good example. So Paul said, "It's time for us to wake up and do the works of light, not of darkness." Living in a time like ours, a terrible time of violence and counter-violence spawned by religious and ethnic resentment, Paul said: "It's time for us to put on the armor of light."

Another writer, probably not Paul, but a follower of his, took up the armor motif in a letter to the Christians in Ephesus. From start to finish that letter was devoted to breaking down the dividing walls between two groups of people who had allowed religion to make them bitter enemies. (What a great letter for us today, in a world inflamed with talk of holy war!). The author of that letter urged Christians to put on the whole armor of God.

The whole armor of God--marvelous irony in that phrase! Imagine a Roman soldier, dressed in full battle gear, the storm trooper of his day. Now, play with that image. Flip all the symbols of might and terror in that warrior's wardrobe around so that they take on opposite meanings. When you were a kid, did you ever talk opposite-talk? Did you ever play the game of saying exactly the opposite of what you meant? This metaphor of spiritual armor is a kind of game, too, but not one for entertaining; rather, one for taking the terror out of the powers that be. By speaking of spiritual armor, our text disarms the storm trooper. It strips him of his ability to instill terror by force of arms, because real power, as the scriptures say in numerous places, is spiritual, not material or political.

Paul said elsewhere in his letter to the Romans: "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds." That's just what the author of the letter to the Ephesians does with this ironic metaphor of spiritual armor. He renews our minds. "Don't become like the storm troopers," he warns us. Be their opposite. Put on armor that is exactly the reverse of their armor. You can't defeat the forces of evil with armor like theirs. You will lose the battle by becoming like them. Use spiritual armor, the whole armor of God.

And what are the articles of that armor? Harken to the spiritual warrior's battle dress:

First, put on the belt of truth, says our text. Square away your belt,

soldier, because if that fails, your scabbard will fall off and your pants will fall down! Truth, says our text, is your belt, that which holds everything else together. Be truthful, else all your other defenses will be good for nothing.

That's a sad, sad truth today. We're spending zillions of dollars on homeland security, stocking up on smart bombs and electronic intelligence, but we're not very smart about being truthful. In the festering nations that incubate terrorism we are seen, more and more, as liars. We Americans say we want freedom and justice for all, but our government continues to support ruthless rulers because it figures they will help us hang onto our--get that--our oil. God help the activist in one of those festering nations--Saudi Arabia and Egypt are prime examples-- who wants the truth about why Americans think they are entitled to do most anything to secure oil that lies under his soil. That lover of freedom and justice gets jailed by despots whom America supports. Truth, America! God wants truth from us! And so does the world.

Secondly, says our text, we must put on the breastplate of righteousness. What is righteousness? As I watched footage from Congress' speeches last Friday, all the speakers standing before huge stars and stripes, I saw self-righteousness displayed, but not righteousness. America wants to pretend that the horror of September the eleventh was simply a matter of good, innocent people being slaughtered by evil people. Our craven politicians are promoting this superficial analysis. Lambasting your enemies and feeling smug isn't righteousness. The Hebrew prophets all agree that righteousness (being right with God) includes doing justice.

During vacation Bible school, Hanover children were learning a song about Joshua marching around the walls of Jericho, marching around and around and around; and then, by God's command, the walls came tumbling down. One child said: "That's what happened on nine-one-one!" The teacher said to me: "Yikes, what could I say? I could see that she wasn't talking just about buildings falling down. She recognized that according to the Bible, God wanted the walls of Jericho to fall down, and that God apparently didn't care whether thousands of innocent people inside died. And that's precisely what the terrorists who plotted the destruction of the twin towers said--that this was Allah's will! I didn't know what to say to her, Tom. What do you say to a child who has grasped something so deep and so terrible? I agree with her! But it disturbs me. God in league with terrorists?"

How do we respond to that child? We grapple with the obvious problem: that the tradition of Zionism in the Hebrew scriptures, the idea that God wanted the Jews to seize Palestine from the people who lived there first, doesn't make sense in terms of other fundamental convictions about God's love and justice for all people. I will deal in greater detail with this matter in a

later sermon comparing Zionism to our chauvinistic American notion of "manifest destiny," which enabled us to rationalize grabbing land from the native Americans. For this morning, though, let me just say that America's foreign policy since the formation of modern Israel has been informed by sympathies for Zionist perspectives that derive from our theology. Many Americans presume that modern Jews have a right to the holy land, because of the Bible story that God gave it to them in the first place. Well, I'm not against Jews having a homeland, but I question whether God ever condoned Jews running roughshod over the first denizens of that part of the world. I don't think that God condoned it then, and I don't think that God condones it now. Whether we want to acknowledge this or not, Arabs' anti-U.S. sentiments do stem largely from America's favoring Israel in the Jewish-Palestinian struggle. In reply to my Hanover friend's question-- 'What can we do for pre-emptive good to move our world toward peace?' -- we can press our politicians on the Palestinian issue. Our homeland's security depends more on making peace in Palestine than anything else. It's high time we say that loudly and clearly to our Congressional representatives. It's high time for us to insist they stop pandering to chauvinists, and get down to the controversial challenges, which will promote peace if they are courageously and diligently pursued.

Regarding the third item in God's whole armor, our text says: "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." For more than a decade we Presbyterians have identified peacemaking as "every believer's calling." We have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on peacemaking literature and peacemaking projects. But after September the eleventh we have been almost totally silent as our country has addressed problems in foreign relations by waging, or threatening war. Why have we been silent? Are we incredulous? When our President speaks of a pre-emptive war, do we think he's just bluffing? Ready yourselves to proclaim peace, our text says. Put on those gospel shoes and get going! What are we waiting for? Let's speak up! Let's question authority, now, when we're not yet in a full-blown war and can still question without being labeled unpatriotic. Some of you have told me that you have written your Congressional representatives already, the President and Vice President. Good! Let's write again. There will be hearings for at least three weeks. They need to hear from us. This is another thing we can do for pre-emptive good.

Finally, our text says, "take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

If we're not careful, we can let these last three articles of armor lead us into self-righteous bombast. In this whole sermon I've tried, as Jesus consistently did, to break down walls that divide goodies from baddies. It's

so easy for us to think that we have the right faith, that we have salvation but nobody else does, that we have the right understanding of God's word and anybody else had better get with our program. I'm heartened that Hanover church members are meeting with Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists and Bahais and Jews to listen to how they understand faith, spiritual healing, and God's will. Our denomination and several others are now promoting Christian-Muslim dialog. Hanover is way ahead of that curve. If you want to join an exciting work of pre-emptive good, come to our peacemaking suppers. Help us to assist our denomination in defining our relationship to other people of faith outside the Christian circle. At a time when religion is becoming a global source of strife, this opportunity to work in Wilmington to promote inter-religious understanding and good will, is perhaps the most effective way we can do pre-emptive good.

This has been a long sermon, and I've said some controversial things. I don't mind swimming against the stream, but I do want to be understood. Since last September's horror, I've stressed Jesus' teaching of forgiving enemies, and even having compassion for the terrorists who struck on nine-eleven. I started this sermon with that very point. But, I don't want you going home with the misunderstanding that pastor Tom excuses what they did. I deplore what they did. It was clearly motivated by hatred, and I oppose hatred wherever it erupts. We need to keep this in mind: Jesus said that before you try to remove a speck from your neighbor's eye, you had better get the log out of your own first, so that you can see clearly. That's what all this peacemaking preaching has been about. It's easy for us to blame Usama Bin Laden and Al Qaida for everything that transpired a year ago. It's easy, but it's not truthful or just. The restorative work rightly begins in our own house. May God give us the courage and the integrity to get with that program.