

"Boldly to Proclaim"
 Ephesians 6:10-20
 August 22, 2021
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"Here I stand -- I can do no other -- God help me -- amen."

These are the words that Martin Luther spoke in April of 1521.

STRONG words.

Words -- with which he STOOD FAST to his beliefs.

The beliefs Martin Luther stood up for -- are beliefs that WE hold dear today.

BUT -- they were beliefs that almost NO ONE held at that time. / They asked him to RECANT. To take back what he believed. / But he STOOD -- in front of a WHOLE ROOM full of authorities and said, "Here I Stand".

If he hadn't been protected by a WISE German king -- the Pope and other officials would have thrown him in prison -- and he would have stood -- in CHAINS -- in some dark cell.

"Here I stand" --- he said.

Do you think WE would have supported Luther -- then -- not knowing what was to come? / Would anyone alive today -- have STOOD -- like he did?

He was -- so to speak -- A SOLDIER -- from the MIGHTY FORTRESS of God . . .

The HYMN we just sang -- was WRITTEN by Martin Luther -- "A Mighty Fortress" -- -- and from the hymn, we get a sense of the permanence -- and solidity -- that Luther stood for.

SO -- WHAT --- do WE -- Christians -- STAND FOR -- today?

And is there anything we WON'T -- stand for?

It's hard enough for ME -- to stand in this PULPIT -- Sunday after Sunday --- and search -- with you -- for meaning -- and guidance -- and hope.

What about - - out THERE?

What does it even mean - - to stand - - on the mighty fortress of God?

This morning's Scripture reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians urges us - - implores us - - to STAND firm - - against the 'wiles of the devil'. / Paul tells us to put on the armor of God: The HELMET - and the BREASTPLATE - the SHOES - and the SHIELD.

It's the language of FIGHTING. Of MILITARY. Of SOLDIERS.

At first it makes me UNEASY - - because I don't like violence, and I don't like FIGHTING - - and I don't think - - it is particularly CHRISTIAN.

The idea of Holy Wars - - sends SHIVERS down my spine.

And - YET - - the wiles of the DEVIL - - and the POWERS - - of darkness, and wickedness, and evil - - are STRONG.

Protestants have spent a lot of time arguing about HYMNS like "Onward Christian Soldiers" - - as we create new Hymnbooks. / Do we want to teach this violent stuff to our children?

But whether we LIKE it or not - - here it is: in our BIBLES.

and in our WORLD.

Maybe the Bible is being more REALISTIC than we are.

Because if you're going to live a GODLY life in the twenty-first century - - and STAND for things like GIVING money AWAY - and the SIMPLE life - and LOVE - and PEACE - and RIGHTEOUSNESS - - and fight against RACISM and SEXISM - - - then you're in for a fight.

Listen to how the great preacher George Buttrick described it in 1987 - - in a sermon on Ephesians. He said this:

"Living for God these days is nothing less than combat. We're NOT involved in a little ARM WRESTLING - - our warfare is something out of Starship "Galactica". The forces we're up against are huge: 'We wrestle not against blood and flesh, but against principalities, and powers, and WORLD RULERS.'

Paul - - in his letter to the Ephesians - - tells us to STAND FIRM - - against the POWERS of DARKNESS. / And - I think that the KEY word here is "STAND".

At first, it may seem EASY - to just STAND. / What's the big deal ? / Who can't stand. / But anyone - who's tried to STAND their ground in the face of EVIL - - knows how difficult it is.

NOW - - look - - at the WEAPONS - - Paul tells us to use.

A breastplate - a shield - shoes - a belt - a helmet - -

- - all of these - - all except the SWORD - - they are all weapons of DEFENSE.

And the SWORD - - is not for GORING FLESH. / The sword, Paul says, is a METAPHOR for the WORD. / That's what Paul says. / That's what the BIBLE SAYS. / The Bible says - - DON'T take this sword literally - - it says it's a SWORD of WORDS.

That's what the BIBLE says.

But - - it's NOT always what PEOPLE have said - about the Bible.

And the Bible - pictures armor that - - is for DEFENSE.

They are weapons of defense. / They WARD OFF.

They help us to STAND FIRM - - as evil seeks us out.

Paul is NOT sending us out on a WITCH HUNT.

Paul is preparing us to STAND our ground. //

In my first or second year as a pastor - - I led a FUNERAL service - - that I think back to - from time to time. / I think back to it - - and to the UNpleasant-ness of some of the memories. Unpleasant-ness comes to mind partly when I think of my OWN role: I didn't have that much experience yet - as a pastor. / So I didn't really have a sense yet - - of what was reasonable - - and what was ordinary - - in these kind of situations.

But the UNpleasant-ness mostly centers around "being bold".

So - - let me back up - and briefly - explain:

The man who had died had lived a long - productive - more or less happy life. / He was a well respected citizen of this small town. / Raised a family there - - and was survived by his wife of 60+ years. / Occasionally feared - - usually joked about. / And - - - a long time church member - - and an elder. / This last fact - was - ignored by a few members of his family - and to other members of his family - it was the only really important thing about him.

He had been a church member.

Some of the family were believers - Christians - - and some were not.

Some led what they considered to be basically moral lives.

Some - - didn't regularly assess - - their moral standing.

And as I prepared for the funeral - I remember the feelings of UNpleasant-ness - - as a young grandson gave me some advice - - he said: "be bold". / He was from among the group of Christians in the family - and it seemed apparent to me - considered himself moral - and basically good - - and without a doubt - saved.

And so I wondered what he wanted me to be - bold - - about.

If it was simply boldness about the FAITH of the man who had died - - his grandfather - - boldness to tell that part of his life - - and out of concern for the members of his family who were NOT Christian - - be bold so that they might hear the power of his grandfather's faith - -

- - well, I was ok with that.

If even - - it was out of love and concern - that one or more of them might hear the bold message of the Gospel - and become Christian in response - - I was ok with that.

But - - if it was out of frustration and disdain for other members of his family - - so that by my boldness - - he might somehow be vindicated - - and the moral life he followed be boldly praised - - while they would be made to feel small and worthless - and unworthy - and unloved -

- - and even more disgusted with this grandson - -

- - and with - the faith he - claimed - -

- - well, that's where - - as I said - - there was some UNpleasant-ness.

I still feel the same way about it. / It's un-pleasant.

After the funeral the grandson said to me, "It was bold - - enough".

Bold enough.

As Paul writes the words which are the Scripture reading - from the letter to the Ephesians - - - for this morning - - as he writes these words he is in prison. / Looking up day after day - - at the armor on the Roman soldiers.

Helmets - breastplates - and shields: Roman prison guards.

And he is - - a prisoner because of his faith.

And the words - he writes, ". . . in opening my mouth BOLDLY to proclaim the mystery of the Gospel - - for which I am an ambassador in chains - - that I might declare it boldly - as I ought to speak". / These words - are about putting on the whole ARMOR of the Gospel. . .

Words about - standing - against the wiles of the devil. . .

And casting light - - into this present darkness. . .

. . . when Paul wrote those words - - no one said - - “bold - - enough”. /

Instead - - - - Paul was - - as bold as it gets.

One of the characteristics of Christians that - - many non-believers do NOT like - - and something that - - for people like Paul - - who really do it - - can barely be avoided - - is boldness.

Lots of people - don't like it.

Some people can hardly help it.

Paul was so bold he even preached to those very prison guards - - and some converted.

So - - look where the boldness - - comes from.

It comes from WAY down deep.

It comes from the bottom.

It comes from a man in prison.

If one of those GUARDS - - were talking about the “armor of God” - - and waving a sword around - - THAT would be different. / Paul's is the sword of the WORD of God - - and it is not a METAL sword - - but it is a REAL sword. / A sword of WORDS!

And Paul at the time he is talking about armor - - Paul's wearing a prison uniform - or rags - at the time.

And that's where the Gospel comes from.

It comes from - - people who were lifted up - - and called - - and healed.

Let's look at a more recent example: I wrote this - - after I returned from Cuba - - years ago. / During a visit - leading a delegation to the 13 Presbyterian churches in Cuba.

These churches became - - our partners in mission here in Oregon - - and I wrote this.

It's about a woman named Elsa - a grandmother - who some of us from Oregon met when she visited here as part of a Presbytery partnership. / I took her up to the top of Mt. Hood and drove her from church to church.

She was an elder in a Presbyterian church in Cuba.

She had been a Presbyterian most of her life.

“Christian soldiers like Elsa - - having put on sensible shoes, and clad in the

- - polyester house dress of peace

remind me that the “armor of God” does NOT resemble

a storm-trooper's outfit -

- whether from Star Wars - or World Wars.

This woman, named Elsa, led a Cuban Presbyterian Church in song . . .

. . . and when she did - there was no question about following.

“Onward Christian Soldiers” is what we sang - on a Sun. in Feb. 1999

- after decades of struggle for her

- and 10 days of listening - and cold showers - for me

I know some people don't like to sing that song: “Onward Christian Soldiers”

It is vivid - - - with images of marching to war

- - and we can remember some violent wars.

But - - I think that's why we keep singing it.

Having preached to a crowded church with the help of a translator, I sat on a wooden bench, getting a close up - side view - of a woman who looked like my grandmother - -
BOLDLY - - flicking her wrist.

Directing - - standing: “Onward Christian Soldiers” - in Spanish - - in Cuba.

There was no need for a translator.

“Boldly to Proclaim” came to life before my eyes.

In the midst of “this present darkness” there was light.

Sometimes I wonder if - - now back in the USA - - where I benefit from economic policies - - which are war - - I’d better not keep watch - -

- - over my shoulder - - for the Christian soldiers.

Either that - - or I better proclaim boldly.

I’m not comfortable with boldness.

I’m more comfortable - - in loafers - - - and pullover sweaters.

Elsa forgive me - - I want to be on your side - -

- - I want your side and my side - to be one side. / Maybe it is.

Whenever I sing that song about Christian Soldiers from now on -

- it will turn - in on itself - within me.

And - if only for a moment - I’ll feel bolder.” //

I am the bread of life, says Jesus

Jesus went DOWN into the world. / God became flesh.

God who knew sin - - and bondage.

God who knew what it was like to look up at Roman guards - - in their armor.

God who RAISES us up - - from just those kinds of places.

That’s as bold as it gets.