

God's P.P.E. – an uncomfortable fit

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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A portion of the Breastplate of St Patrick. What an interesting story, myth woven in with fact - born in Britain, as a teenager Patrick was abducted by pirates, taken to, and held in Ireland for 6 years before he was able to flee.¹ That imprisonment, he later wrote, helped shape his spirituality. That shamrock often seen in art depictions of him, he is said to have used it as a symbol of the Trinity: Creator, Son and Spirit, all woven together.

Another whose faith seemed to be galvanized in prison was the early follower of Jesus, Paul. In the Ephesians passage today, attributed to Paul, but scholars tell us it was likely written by a disciple of his, the writer is imprisoned, yet offering those in Jesus' movement inspiration – along the lines of the character William Wallace, the hero played by Mel Gibson in the movie Braveheart. Remember the rally cry?

*...tell our enemies that they may take our lives,
but they'll never take... OUR FREEDOM!²*

I'll be honest; I'm very uncomfortable with the military imagery of today's reading from Ephesians. Granted, most the allusions are to, in fact, *defensive* equipment: helmet, breastplate, belt. However, there is most definitely mention of a "sword of the Spirit"; most definitely an weapon. Christian history, we know, is full of events where people read passages like this literally, using the Bible to control and hurt, and kill those who did not capitulate in times of Christian empire.

There were times when Christian leaders did not have power or authority – examples of such leaders, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelly McClung, and World War II Christian opponent of Hitler, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I'm quite certain that spiritual armour was very real for them, but much less literally.

Again, we look at the words of the patron saint of Ireland:

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me...³

Complete trust in God's protection – *Armour* of a sort. Imagine Nelson Mandela's existence in prison, waiting. South Africans suffering under Apartheid, waiting, struggling. Subsisting on faith, and little more, takes its toll. I can only imagine, enjoying the privileges of life in my time.

¹ Facts and myths about St. Patrick - <https://www.history.com/topics/st-patricks-day/who-was-saint-patrick>

² Braveheart. 20th Century Fox, ©1995.. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIvRkjOd1f8>

³ St. Patrick's Breastplate, and how it was used. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Patrick%27s_Breastplate

I can only imagine the experience of health care heroes throughout this year-and-a-half pandemic. Perhaps some of you joining this worship have experienced it. The Personal Protective Equipment, or P.P.E. What is it like under all those layers of protection, working in the I.C.U.? Restrictive for sure. We've seen the photos of lines carved in faces of doctors and nurses from the masks. A long list of protocols they need to follow to the letter, as they courageously save lives from COVID. Profoundly uncomfortable, to say the least. That too is an armour of a sort.

So, as I try to transpose spiritual armour into our modern moment, my question for you, and me, is: *What spiritual threats do we face today, for which we need protection as we journey?*

I will name things that I see, like: unfettered materialism; racism, sexism, and so many "isms"; vast inequities in our world that are only getting worse. But I wonder if the greatest spiritual threats are the *subtle ones*: the temptation to conform; learning from those around us to ignore those who are different from us or who disagree with our point of view.

Holy One, protect us from those subtle temptations.

How about our inclination to compare ourselves to someone else? Or, for me, a big one is to avoid conflicts that need to be faced.

I can imagine the spiritual armour going on Viola Desmond, a racialized woman who, in 1946, refused to leave the segregated Whites-only section of the Roseland Theatre in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. When the Spirit is moving, principalities and powers had better get out of the way!

The inspirational message today from Ephesians ends with Paul asking the community to pray for him that he might make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel.

That task of living out, giving testimony to, the mystery of Gospel Good News – today, THAT is a tough task. It is easier to capitulate, to conform, to concede. Standing firm in faith and letting the Spirit speak love through us, well, letting God do what God needs to do in us. That is an uncomfortable thing. But God is up to something, and we need to let God DO IT in, through, and all around us. Amen.