

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 16
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
August 22, 2021
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18
Psalm 34:15-22
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

Bread and Armor

At last, dear ones, we have arrived at the fifth of the five Sundays of this summer “bread season.” Every three years at this time, when the summer is thick and ripe...as crops are coming in and the harvest approaches...in the midst of our year with Mark's gospel, we have these five Sundays with readings from John's gospel and Jesus' great discourse on bread in John chapter 6.

We have in these weeks examined bread as a metaphor for all kinds of nourishment—spiritual, physical, mental, emotional. We have considered what kind of bread we want to make and what ingredients should and shouldn't go in it. And we have contemplated the reality that the only bread that really matters, that we can really depend on, is the bread we have right now, in this moment, in “the concrete context of the here and now” (Henri Nouwen). And that right-now bread is the living bread, sent from God the great I AM, the living bread that is always coming into the world.

So, after four sermons about bread, is there anything more to be said?

What else do today's readings tell us beyond all the approaches to bread we have brought to bear these last four weeks? Well, perhaps, a few things.

First, there's this idea from our first reading from the book of Joshua. Sometimes after we have baked our own bread, we forget that it is God who provided the good ingredients and the skill to create nourishment through collaboration with God.

Joshua lays out the choice quite plainly: after getting what you dreamed of, do you then stop following the true God of your life and your faith and begin actively and only worshiping something else?

It's not so difficult to do. Once our times of crisis are over, it's pretty easy for our desperate pleas to God to give way to taking nearly everything for granted.

Indeed, the second reading from Ephesians indicates it takes vigilance, watchful, active vigilance, not to fall into this very easy human predicament.

So, what do we have at our disposal to keep our focus steady and our aim true? What can help us live out our good and pure intentions to love and serve God, God's people, and God's world?

The epistle written to the congregation in the beautiful and cosmopolitan city of Ephesus, where many different kinds of Jesus followers were doing a new thing by gathering around a common table, says they should put on the full armor of God. And what is that?

What do these things mean? The belt of truth? The breastplate of righteousness? As shoes for your feet...whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace? The shield of faith? The helmet of salvation? The sword of the Spirit?

All this equipment—belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, sword—was comprehensible to first-century hearers; they were perhaps more familiar than they would have preferred to be with the standard issue uniforms, equipment, and weaponry of Roman soldiers.

The Roman Empire was vast, its peoples and lands diverse. Yet the kit of Roman soldiers was basically the same wherever they were deployed. So first-century folks could easily envision these grace gifts and holy sources of strength as the familiar physical implements worn and carried by the Empire's army.

Any time I encounter one of these references to armor in the New Testament I think about the story of David going out to face Goliath. Remember how Saul, David's king, tried to support David in going out to represent Israel in solo combat against Goliath, the Philistines' champion? Saul gave David his own royal armor to wear.

But Saul was a grown man, and, the texts of Samuel tell us, stood head and shoulders taller than everybody else among the people of Israel. And David was still a boy, a very brave but very young man. Saul's armor was huge and heavy and did not fit David. He said to the king, "Thanks, but no thanks." And then David went to a nearby stream and chose five smooth stones. And he took those and his slingshot and the staff he used to tend his father's sheep and went out to face a giant who stood over nine feet tall.

A slingshot, five stones, and a staff. Hardly armor at all. And yet, it was the armor that worked for David, tools so familiar to him they were like extensions of his own body.

Saul's armor didn't work for David. David's armor wouldn't have worked for Saul.

And just so, these grace gifts and holy sources of strength that the writer to the Ephesians calls "the full armor of God" and the epistle to the Romans calls "the armor of light" will not look the same for all of us—or on each of us. Yet they are available to all of us: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Holy Spirit. Available to all of us but manifested reliably yet distinctively in each of us.

I suggest to you today that the "full armor of God," the "armor of light" is not the stuff with which we armor up in defensiveness or unresponsiveness. It's not self-justification or self-delusion. It's not even self-protection much less self-aggrandizement. Rather, this armor is

the stuff that lets us live fully into our calling. For though we are not all called to the same thing, we are all called to something.

This armor is counter-intuitive: knowledge of it gives us courage to make ourselves vulnerable as Jesus the Christ made himself vulnerable by coming to us and living among us.

This armor is the strength of the living Christ made manifest in us. It is all those things that keep us grounded in gratitude and in the goodness of God. It is all those things that help us remember who and whose we are, that allow us to see ourselves and others with compassion. It is all those things that equip and empower us to bear the light of Christ into the world and to live out our promises as baptized people.

And this, dear ones, is good news. For as our last bread gospel of these five Sundays indicates, this path of following Jesus the Christ, the Wisdom and Word of God sent from the I AM, is not always easy. Sometimes when people discover it isn't all sweetness and light, that there are days without warm fuzzies, that living by this teaching is difficult, they give it up. Indeed, there are days when it definitely seems like the very most difficult path.

So, why would we continue to follow this path pioneered by and set forth for us by Jesus the Christ, the living bread sent down from heaven, even or especially when it is difficult?

Because as the disciples turned apostles understood and declared: it is the path of life. Where else can we go? Jesus the Christ, the living bread that is eternally coming down from heaven, has the words of life and has marked the course for us. We do not walk this hard and holy road alone. And, amazingly, we often find it to be "none other than the way of life and peace."

We feed on this living bread and we in turn become it, that is, we ourselves become and are Christ's body.

St Teresa of Avila, a Spanish Carmelite nun, mystic, and spiritual writer of the sixteenth century expresses it this way:

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

And this, dear ones, is the entire point: to behold what we are and become what we receive: the body of Christ broken and given for the world.