



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MARYLAND

Put on the armor of God

November 16, 2017

At the beginning of the month we were stunned at the mass shooting inside First Baptist Church, Sutherland Springs, Texas. Since then much of the discussion has focused on how to make churches safer. Similar conversations happened after the Las Vegas massacre: How can we make open crowd venues safer?

Talk of armed guards, using metal detectors or locking church doors during services has been showing up in the media and on the internet. Reporters are surprised when we talk about living by a different set of rules. Some of them can't understand our message of love, compassion, hope and forgiveness in the face of evil.

This week's Sunday epistle from 1st Thessalonians (5:1-11) says we are to "...put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation." The gospels say nothing to Christians about arming ourselves. And the reading gives instructions on what our mission is: "For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other..."

Fear is a powerful motivator. It's often associated with ignorance. Fear of someone different than ourselves can be overcome when we find common ground. Fear can provoke the basic human response of fight or flight. But we are called to a different way of being as Christians.

That's why some version of "be not afraid" shows up in the bible more than 300 times. Instead of "fight or flight," the response for Christians is to have faith. Or, as we are told in the Letter to the Ephesians (6:11-12), "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."

Our churches are sacred spaces. Senseless violence has visited houses of God for as long as there have been churches. In recent years, African American churches have been burned, bombed and scenes of shootings. Archbishop Oscar Romero was gunned down in a church in El Salvador while celebrating the Eucharist. And, of course, we know the heartbreak here in Maryland when evil visited St. Peter's, Ellicott City, and gun violence took the lives of the Rev. Mary Marguerite Kohn, Brenda Brewington and Douglas Jones.

Our response should be to encourage one another to put on "the breastplate of faith and love" and wear the helmet of hope. Let's not be paralyzed by fear. Let's be freed by Jesus' promises of eternal life, and live into the Kingdom of God on earth here and now. It's not the will of God that we turn our church buildings into armed fortresses. Yes, we should be attentive and put emergency precautions into place. But the gospel calls us to engage the risk of radical welcome and inclusive hospitality.

Paul encouraged the Ephesians (6:14-17) with these words: “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.”

Faithfully,

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