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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

August 22, 2021

Year B, Proper 16, Track 2, Revised Common Lectionary

[Joshua 24:1-2a,14-18](#)

[Psalm 34:15-22](#)

[Ephesians 6:10-20](#)

[John 6:56-69](#)

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One of the striking images of this week was of Khalil Haqqani, one of the leaders of the Taliban, speaking at Friday prayers at the main mosque of Kabul. He spoke of security and prosperity and education. He projected confidence and victory. He reinforced that image by carrying an American-made M4 rifle. At his sides stood bodyguards, similarly armed, and dressed in body armor and helmets and night-vision goggles of the kind that had been issued to the US-funded Afghan army.<sup>1</sup> It was hard to miss the message. We are strong. We are in charge. We hold power and authority. It was the same message those weapons and armor had spoken when the American troops and their Afghan allies had worn them on patrol, but now at the service of the opposite side.

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<sup>1</sup> “Khalil Haqqani, long on America’s terrorist list, attends Friday prayers,” *New York Times* (August 19, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/08/19/world/afghanistan-photos#khalil-haqqani-long-on-americas-terrorist-list-attends-friday-prayers>, accessed August 21, 2021.

Today's M4 rifles and body armor are yesterday's swords and breastplates; the weapons change but the purpose and the message is the same. The superpower of the first century was Rome, and the legionaries who stood at the side of Tiberius Caesar dressed in gleaming armor and carried razor-sharp swords. Soldiers dressed like this stood as security at the cross of Jesus. They stood as security outside the prison of Paul as he wrote to the churches. "Pray for me that I may boldly share the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains."

And he writes to them that they are to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. To dress in armor and helmets, to carry shields and swords. But not really. Their shield is to be faith. Their belt is to be truth, their breastplate righteousness, their helmet salvation. Their sword is to be God's word.

"Take up the M4 rifle of God's word," he might write to us today. On the one hand, it makes sense. Nothing is stronger than God's word. Nothing is more protective than faith. But of course it takes faith to believe that when you have a real, cold, hard rifle pointed in your direction.

The people of Israel, when they stood before Joshua and he challenged them to decide whom they would serve, had signs to point to. "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD who brought us out of Egypt, out of slavery, who did great signs in our sight." God had parted the Red Sea and brought water from a rock and sent manna from heaven and dried up the Jordan River for them to cross into the promised land and flattened the walls of Jericho for them to take possession. Now I think many of us can point to moments in our lives where God acted; turning points that stand as signs for us of God's presence and loving care and guidance in our lives. But many of them aren't as dramatic as that.

And certainly there are many situations where we might wish to see God dramatically intervening in the physical world, tearing open the heavens and coming down to part a sea or smite our enemies. To halt a pandemic, or stop a murder or a natural disaster or a car accident. And where we don't see that happen.

“The righteous cry, and the LORD hears them, and delivers them from all their troubles,” says our Psalm today. “Many are the troubles of the righteous, but the LORD will deliver them out of them all. The LORD will keep safe all their bones; not one of them shall be broken. Evil shall slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be punished.” And I hear this psalm and imagine it as a kind of wishful-hopeful cry from the heart: “Oh that evil would slay the wicked! Would that not one of the bones of the righteous would be broken! If only those who hate the righteous were punished!”

It's poignant, hearing the psalm that way. It's a tragic reality about being human here in this age when we so often see hatred and violence seemingly triumphant and when we see a lot of bones of the righteous being broken, and worse.

Paul knew hatred and violence. He'd been in prison many times, whipped and beaten many times for the sake of the message of Jesus. He'd even been shipwrecked. He had no illusions about faith being a kind of magic talisman that keeps you safe from suffering. He writes about perseverance and boldness. And he writes that our true struggle isn't against enemies of flesh and blood. It's against the powers of darkness; the spiritual forces of evil that rule and hold power in this world. It's against those forces that we deploy the weapons and armor of God.

There's much for us to hear in these words. "Our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood." In these days of political and economic struggle, Paul calls us to hold fast to the truth that as Christians, we will constantly have opponents and adversaries, but that no human being is ultimately our enemy. We are struggling not to destroy human beings and children of God but to win them to God's truth, to conquer them with the power of our love, with the M4 rifle of the Spirit.

And there's much for us to hear in Paul's conviction that God is in charge even when things by human standards are grim. Paul won his own greatest victory on a Roman execution block, following the footsteps of his Lord. As followers of a crucified and risen Lord we know that God holds us in life even when our mortal bodies lie in death. Jesus says, "Whoever eats this bread will live for ever." He himself is that bread. And he promises us never-ending life.

Sometimes people say the hope for a life beyond death is nothing but wishful thinking, the opiate of the people: something to console people so they can embrace their suffering and oppression instead of rising up and changing things. From a Christian point of view it's exactly the opposite. It's not having to fear death that gives us the courage to be bold in this life. It's knowing God is in charge that lets us take risks, prosper even in defeat. The bread of life isn't an opiate; he is our rations to give us strength for the battle.

God is in charge. The weapons of the Spirit are stronger than human weapons, the armor of God is stronger than human armor. There will come a day when we will see that made clear on earth as it is in heaven. It may not be in this lifetime for you or for me, but it will come. Till then we walk by faith, armed with God's truth and righteousness, nourished by the bread of Jesus.