

Judges 3:12-30
Micah 4:1-5
Ephesians 6: 10-18
Matthew 10:34

Swords
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Last Sunday was a busy day. It was Pentecost, so worship had a special celebratory character. There was a wonderful brunch after worship, which included some thoughtful discussions about the energy in our church. Then there was a Sundays @ 4 discussion time with Kenneth Cracknell, when ideas about religious conflict and peacemaking and fear of the “other” were shared. **Then**, that evening, I watched The Hobbit: the Peter Jackson film that is the first of a trilogy based on the book of the same name. What a day.

Now, I am not going to tell you that I valued one part of the day over another. But I will tell you that J.R.R. Tolkien’s story-telling runs very deep for me. The Lord of the Rings and the world of Middle Earth were formative imagination playgrounds in my youth. I loved reading those books to myself and then to my children. And I get a little upset when filmmakers - even really talented filmmakers – tamper with them too much.

Here’s what struck me about the film of The Hobbit: it took a fairly light-hearted adventure - a sort of children’s entryway into the world of Middle Earth, a celebration of the power of what is small and humble and authentic - and turned it into a film about how many ways there are to kill an orc. The battle scenes go on and on: what takes a sentence or two in the text goes on for a 20-minute assault of computer-generation. Rather than glorifying the humble but clever Hobbit, we get a glorification of violence, pure and simple.

Human beings have a complicated relationship with stories of war. In many ways, life is a struggle: nations struggle with each other over limited resources; religious groups struggle with each other over ethical norms; citizens struggle with each other over town politics; individuals struggle with neighbors and families over personal relationships; patients battle cancer or other health threats; we experience struggles within ourselves in our spiritual growth. And so metaphors of battle and swords and conflict come quickly to mind, even in our sacred writings.

The Scripture readings today are not in the lectionary cycle for this week. The first Scripture reading, the story of Ehud and King Eglon, **never** shows up in the lectionary, and maybe you can understand why. It is a rather crude description, more like one of those classic folktales of the clever trickster than elevating spiritual discourse. The truth is, both the Hebrew and Christian holy books have some texts that we would rather put aside: both use metaphors of violence, if not outright commands to **be** violent. And, just to confuse us, both testaments offer visions of a time when violence will be unnecessary, when swords will be beaten into plowshares, and God’s peace will reign on earth.

The Book of Judges, which we rarely read these days (unless it is to tell the story of Deborah or Gideon), is an example of a text that we can no longer take at face value. We can no longer feel easy celebrating the story of an assassin, no matter how clever, and the extermination of an entire

army of 10,000 men. In spite of the many “heroes” who appear in the Book of Judges, it is the story of failure. Israel is broken. Time is bought by various military victories, but after each the refrain is the same. After a short-lived peace is won through war, we read “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” The tribal confederation spirals down into viciousness, and the book ends with horrific stories of rape, dismemberment, and genocide. Hardly a piece of Scripture for us to emulate: more like a dire warning. No wonder that prophets in later centuries, like Micah, will speak in wistful tones of the end of war, and the transfiguration of swords into farm implements.

Even though many of the stories in the book of Judges are distasteful, they serve as a reminder of human pride and folly – even a reminder of our short memories. Over and over again, the tribes “buy” peace with war. Actually, the 80 years of peace achieved by the destruction of the Moabites seems like a long stretch: certainly longer than any period of peace in recent American history. We, even more than Ehud, rely on a sharp sword to make quick end to our problems. We, even more than the ancient Hebrews, easily forget the lessons of the past.

Occasionally though, we seem to get it right: our memorials display clearly the costs of our violent solutions, rather than glorifying war. The first officially proclaimed Memorial Day was in May 1868. Proclaimed by a Union general, on that May 30th flowers were placed on the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. Even though there had been separate days of memorial for the North and the South in the first couple of years after the end of the Civil War, within a very short time it became a day of remembrance for **all** the dead. This is what saved it from being a simple day of victory: we are healed not only when we make peace, but when we honor the enemy dead.

In a work of fantasy fiction like *The Hobbit*, enemies can be merely evil, simply evil, so that the sword is the only answer. How could one object to destroying beings like goblins, who have no capacity for good? But we do not live in that fantasy world: we live in a world redeemed by the grace of God. And so some of the early Christian writers, following the lead of some Hebrew prophets, began to shift the meaning of an ancient vocabulary. The passage read today from the letter to the Ephesians is a sort of sermon on passages from the prophet Isaiah, a reinterpretation of the meaning of armor and weapons.

The “whole armor of God” is not used to attack people. Those belts, breastplates, shoes, shields and helmets are the tools we use “to proclaim the gospel of peace.” It’s an odd juxtaposition, isn’t it: a startling metaphor. What makes it useful is its recognition that life involves struggle in so many ways. We are struggling with forces that seem to overwhelm at times, forces both within and without us. This whole armor of God protects us against fear, which is one of the great motivators of violence. The armor gives us internal graces and gifts, like faith and courage and a sense of being healed, which keep us from needing actual armor, actual weapons.

Unlike Ehud, we do not make or use a real sword. The sword of the Spirit is God’s word, God speaking to us and through us, God teaching us to be reflective about our own motives and shortcomings. God’s word enables us to have internal and external conversations, which cut through simple boundaries of us and them, enemy and friend.

Danielle Taylor, our Sunday School coordinator, told me about a Vacation Bible School she worked on a few years ago up in Randolph. It was based on this passage from Ephesians. The

children and their teachers decided on an issue that needed tackling, an issue that needed the whole armor of God. They chose “bullying.” Not bullies, but bullying. They wrote a play that showed how honest conversations, that included the child behaving badly, gave clarity and healing to both sides of a conflicted situation. They did not need real weapons for this: they needed the faith, courage, and determination to heal that comes from God. They could use the sword metaphor and transform it into a peacemaking tool.

Any form of dialogue we have with former or current or potential enemies will involve some honesty about the past: the ways that we have allowed our fear to inform our religious practice, the ways that we have allowed our traditions to justify violence, the ways that we have allow our vocabulary to be hurtful.

Later in this service of worship, we will be singing a hymn that was composed at the beginning of a war – the Civil War. Using biblical imagery, Julia Ward Howe framed the struggle against slavery as a religious battle between good and evil. God wields the “terrible swift sword” found in the prophecies of Isaiah, and marches on like a general. In recent decades, this hymn has become controversial, as it seems to glorify violence with its choice of biblical metaphors. I would like to think that we can reclaim this hymn, as we must re-read and reclaim Scripture. Not accepting any of the words as a simple justification for our side, or our tribe, or our nation or our denomination, but allowing the words to judge us as well as our enemies, allowing the words to reveal our own flaws and prejudices.

Even though Memorial Day is a secular, national holiday, I reference it today because our faith is based on memorials and has a lot to teach us about the uses and misuses of memory. Whether we watch a parade, or visit a cemetery, or gaze at a photo, or sit down with people of other faiths to talk about our fears, we reach back into the deep reservoir of our faith to touch the divine moving through human life. We reach back and learn, so that God can do a new thing. We reach back, so that we can move forward in peace. Thanks be to God. Amen.