

November 13, 2011

The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

1 Thessalonians 5.1-11

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector

It will come as no surprise to many of you that war imagery generally does not speak to me as a metaphor for faith, God, the Gospel or the Kingdom of Heaven. Personally, I am not a proponent of war here on earth and pray that war is made rarely and as a last resort. War is costly and I have a hard time working it into my own understanding of a loving God who wants all good things for us.

I say this on this particular day with a profound respect for our veterans. There are many in my family, grandfathers, fathers, brothers, who offered their very lives to keep safe those things they cherished and believed in deeply. And I know that those in my family who served would, to a man, happily welcome a day when it is no longer necessary for young men and young women to make such a brave and terrifying offering. And so it is for them and for my own children that I pray a hopeful though perhaps futile prayer for a permanent end of war as a part of the human condition.

Now that I have said all that, imagine my own surprise when the piece of today's readings that most thoroughly grabbed my imagination was this line from First Thessalonians: "Let us... put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation."

The Holy Spirit has a good sense of humor.

The breastplate and helmet are, as you can imagine, pieces of body armor. Used to protect the most important and perhaps most vulnerable parts of our bodies, the head and the torso, soldiers would have worn these in battle to be shielded from the onslaught of whatever was coming toward them, arrows, swords, clubs, fire.

The protected the soldier through some dark and horrific circumstances. They helped him get his own work done. They kept him strong.

So how wonderful to have a breastplate of faith and love, a helmet of salvation. Protected by those things that are, when nurtured, stronger than just about any other power in the kingdom. Stronger than evil. Certainly stronger than death. These are the armor of God.

And armor of this sort is not only for protection against whatever dark and horrifying thing that we might encounter, but the armor of faith, love and salvation, when worn properly, can give us the confidence to get our work done, knowing that we are so covered.

This breastplate and helmet are not something out of Harry Potter, not superpowered so that life will not touch us. We are not suddenly made of Kevlar, impervious to all that is whirling around us. We are still mortal, we are still human. We can still be hurt and broken. We can be hurt because we love, because we invest ourselves in each other and because we make mistakes.

But this armor of faith and love and salvation reminds us that, even when we are broken, we are beloved, that even when we are weak, we are held in the arms of God who weeps with us.

Our faith, love and salvation remind us that our wounds will heal. We will be scarred but we will see wholeness again.

So where are the breastplate and helmet? Look around you. This is it, friends. These are the ones that will stand up at your child's baptism, who will call when you are missed, who will save your seat in church, who will serve coffee at your mother's funeral, who will read the 23rd Psalm at your funeral. These are the ones who will teach you how to read the Gospel and how to live the Gospel and how to be the Gospel.

And as you are looking around at the people who are this for you, please note that others are looking at you. That is what the Christian community is about. We are the breastplate and helmet, the keepers of faith and hope and salvation, for one another.

Church is not a consumer culture. It is a community where sometimes, we put in many more resources than we see instant results. What do you think Mary Jane Peters would think of the results of her donation in 1903 of a few acres of land on North Avenue to build a Sunday School for local kids? We have far exceeded any dream she may have had when practicing her own generosity.

And we are bound to continue to build the kingdom in this way as it is through the kingdom that we are protected and strengthened, made to stand when we are weak, moved to serve when we are strong.

But it only works if you show up. And perhaps no one understands this like our veterans, who depended on one another for survival in some of the most inhuman conditions, and who relied on one another for protection and strength. It was community of the most intense and rigorous kind.

It is from God that we draw what we need to survive. God will always be with us, God will always love us. But it is through others that God is made manifest. It is through the arms of others that we are comforted by God. It is through the hands of others that we are fed by God. It is through the words of others that we know we are loved by God.

It is through others that we know that our soft, breakable, beating hearts are protected by the breastplate of faith and love. And it is through others that our healthy, thinking minds are given permission to concentrate on that which is of great worth by the helmet of salvation.

And it is through each of us that others know it to. No one is exempt. Everyone is necessary.

We can't do this alone. It is not necessary for us to bear the trials and perils of this life alone. And it is selfish to keep the joys and celebrations to ourselves. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.