

Aug 19      Chained Yet Strong

Ephesians 6:10-20

These words from the Apostle Paul, “I am an ambassador in chains for the sake of the Gospel” took on new meaning for me last year. The Basilica of St Paul’s Outside the Walls, in Rome, is the reputed burial place for the Apostle Paul. His tomb is under the high altar and you can view it as you kneel and pray. Just above his tomb are displayed a set of chains. Though it cannot be proven, the faithful for over 1000 years have believed these were the actual chains used to fetter Paul when he was under house arrest in Rome. Seeing those chains, thinking about all he had endured as a missionary of the Gospel, I was overwhelmed with emotion. It was probably one of the most dramatic moments on my entire study leave.

After returning home, I read again this passage from Ephesians. I need to admit something. In the past when I have read this passage, I tend to read verses 10-17 about putting on the whole armor of God and skim the rest. I have preached often about what it means to put on the armor of God. This year as I was reading this passage I actually paid attention to the last three verses. It ends with Paul proclaiming that he is an ambassador in chains for the sake of the Gospel. As I thought about that phrase, “ambassador in chains” and thought about the actual chains I had seen, I began to realize that the conversation Paul had been having about putting on the whole armor of God actually illuminates his present circumstances. He was sharing how he was remaining strong and faithful in such a trying situation. Today I want us to look at that connection for we, like Paul, find ourselves in difficult places at times in our lives and we need the strength and confidence to remain faithful.

When we hear the word “ambassador” we tend to think about the current definition of that term. An ambassador today is an official representative of their country. It is usually a position of great honor and at times some power. This was not the ambassador’s role in Paul’s day. The word ambassador comes from a Latin word that is best translated as servant, because the one who was sent to proclaim a message was considered to be serving the wishes and will of the one they represented. They were messengers. If the ambassador’s words were ignored then he was often put in chains,

imprisoned, and sometimes killed as a sign that the hearer would not be intimidated. So, when Paul proclaims himself to be an ambassador in chains he is saying to his listeners: I am a servant of God, sent to share the Good News about Jesus. They have rejected my message so I am asking you to pray for me so that I remain faithful to the task I have been given. He realized that, to the world, it appears he has failed in his mission. He doesn't want the Christian faithful to become discouraged. He feels he still has a mission to accomplish and so he wants strength and confidence to continue living the role of an ambassador even when he is in chains.

How does this understanding of his purpose and situation inform the discussion he had just had about putting on the whole armor of God? First, we need to see that the armor, as Paul is talking about it, is designed to help folks stand fast. We are not asked to put on this armor so we are ready for some aggressive action. Soldiers don armor then and now when they are going into harm's way. It is to protect them as they go into battle. Paul sees us needing to be protected so that we can stand fast, another term would be, remain faithful, when the weight of the world comes crushing down upon us. At this moment the weight of the entire Roman Empire is against Paul. He talks about this struggle in terms such as cosmic darkness and tricks of the devil. We are not asked to attack those forces. God will do that. We are asked to be faithful in the face of temptation, manipulation, and coercion. Paul understood being faithful often brings negative consequences. But that should not keep us from standing fast for we are messengers of Christ.

Are you beginning to see how Paul's discussion about armor connects to his situation? When you are in chains all the forces of the world are arrayed against you. It is easy to give into the temptation, to just "go with the flow." To stand on your principals, to not give in, means a much more difficult time for you and at times for those around you. You have to be strong to stand fast in such situations. Paul in telling others to put on the whole armor of God implies that this is what he has done and continues to need to do if he is to remain faithful as an ambassador in chains. He even says to them to stay alert by praying for all believers. Paul knew that he might die at any time. He knew he was facing injustice. Life was challenging. An ambassador in chains has little

likelihood that his mission will be a success. It seems as if Paul is a failure. And yet we know he wins. When we are facing dark and difficult times we need to focus on how God is with us, protecting us, while praying for wisdom and confidence. It is this that gives us strength. Life presents challenges, God is with us, and true strength comes not from our resources but from God.

Paul, instead of being ashamed of his chains, lifts them up as a sign of his faithfulness. He uses the armor metaphor to help his people know that God is faithful, will stand with them and protect them. He understood that his own life might end at any moment but in faith God's good will would prevail. He had suffered beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, harassment from bandits, and attacks by other Christians in his years as a missionary. Wearing that armor all this time had allowed him to remain faithful and now in chains he proclaims a message of hope. He did not see his work as being finished, he definitively knew God's work was not done and all he asked for was prayers to continue the work of an ambassador, a messenger, for as long as he could. His chains in the basilica were a powerful reminder to me of his faithfulness to God.

In one of my churches a man had grown up with a father who was anti-church. He belittled his mother for going to church and teased his son every time he went with his mother. This negativity had its effect and after a while the son quit attending. But his mom did not. She went with his sister and when the sister quit going she went alone. She went each week faithfully. Whenever dad put her faith down she just smiled and said something about I love you and so does God. Mom's faithful witness finally got to him. In college he started attending a college Christian group. He met a woman in that group. He asked her to marry him and she agreed with one provision, that he would continue to go to church. They married and he had been in the church all his life. Dad never changed. He still grieved for his hardness of heart. But mom was his example of one who put on the armor of God. She refused to let the forces of the world change her or deflect her and it ultimately changed his life. She was his ambassador in chains and her faithful witness challenged him daily to be faithful and encouraging of those who were struggling.

May we realize God gives us the tools to also share the gospel in good and challenging times. We might, at moments, feel like we are ambassadors in chains with all the forces of the world against us, but God is with us, our mission is to be faithful, not successful. And when we rely upon God's strength, who knows what good we might accomplish?