



MEN'S DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, July 27, 2008

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Lection – Ephesians 6:10-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 10) Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. (v. 11) Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. (v. 12) 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. (v. 13) Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. (v. 14) Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. (v. 15) As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. (v. 16) 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. (v. 17) Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Men's Day in many African American congregations is a Sunday to honor the men of the Church, which is especially important in a society that mainly sees negative images of black males through the media. The high incarceration rate of African American young males is astounding; it has created an absence of black men in households and in the church. Thus, this day is particularly important in affirming the positive contributions of churchgoing men to counteract the plethora of negative perceptions of black men. There may not be many men in the Church, compared to women, but they still play a vital role in it. They have a voice and presence in an age when many black men are muted, invisible, nameless, and just another number in prison. On this day, black men are not viewed as chauvinistic or misogynistic, but are celebrated for their presence and contributions. For this liturgical moment, churches may explicitly invite men to participate in the worship leadership on this day. There might be an invited preacher, but most certainly one should hear the sweet melodies of a male chorus singing to a God who loves them. God loves black men when some can't stand the sight of them. On this Sunday, men are celebrated as God's creation.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Ephesians 6:10-17

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

"Macho, macho man." What does it mean to be a man? Tough? Rich? Powerful? A Player? I am continually reminded that some young black males are struggling with what it means to be a man. Recently in Philadelphia, a group of teenage black men beat up a young, Starbucks manager, soon-to-be-married man, "just for kicks." They skipped school just to beat up someone, "for kicks," literally kicking and punching him to his death. Muted and invisible, they think the only way to be heard and seen is through senseless violent attacks such as this. They declare, "I am a man" through such actions. "I am a man?"

There are violent wars and battles occurring all over the world, but we have our own wars on the streets right here. We do not have to look into Iraq or Afghanistan for terrorism. We have it right here -- terrorism on our streets. Senseless shootings and beatings of innocent men. "I am a man?" Is violence the only way for young black men to express their manhood? Are there other options in the battle called life? Ephesians shows us another way to say, "I am a man."

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The writer of Ephesians clearly talks about a battle or struggle going on but, "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh" (v. 12) on the streets; that is, not against each other, not against other human beings. Here the struggle is "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (v. 12), "against the wiles of the devil" (v. 11). The battle is cosmic. The battle is bigger than us. Nonetheless, we are in a battle, and these powers are manifesting on the

earth in systems and structures that destroy our flesh and blood, our young black men. We are in a battle for the lives of our young men who are killing themselves and others in street-side terrorism. We are in a battle for the souls of black men who have been muted and invisible and crying out, "I am a man." If these Ephesian words are not enough to get a glimpse of the intense, ongoing spiritual battle, then the military images should be enough -- "the whole *armor* of God," "the *belt* of truth," "*breastplate* of righteousness," "*shoes* for your feet," "*shield* of faith," "*helmet* of salvation," "*sword* of the Spirit." One needs protection in any war, and this one is no different.

Yet, what is different is who owns the military regalia. It is not ours. It is God's. Twice the writer notes "the whole armor *of God*" (vv. 11, 13). The entire armor is owned by God -- the belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, and sword. In this struggle, God provides what is needed to fight this battle. Fists are not required, but faith is; for, we are encouraged to "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of *his* power" (v. 10). No doubt about it -- it is God who has the power and empowers us. Earlier in Ephesians, we hear that God has "great power" at work in Christ "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come" (1:19-22). What a powerful God! God's power is the source that allows us "to stand" (vv. 11, 13). God has the power. God is *the man!* "Can't touch this," God says. The evil one may throw "flaming arrows" (v. 16), but we will not burn because God fights this battle. "Macho, macho man?" No. Praying, praying man (vv. 18-20).

Praying in the Spirit may not be fashionable or cool but this is a nonviolent fight, God-style. This is not a return violence-for-violence battle. It is a nonviolent one. The only offensive weapon is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (v. 17). We are called to fight with words, a nonviolent means during war. In God's army, the fighting tactics are different. Our only weapon is a word. There are no guns, no knives, and no fists. Only the command "to stand" (vv. 11, 13). It doesn't say attack, kill, maim, or torture. Just "stand." "Stand" up and say "I am a man," just like the black Memphis sanitation workers on strike in 1968. "I am a man," when I stand for what is right. "I am a man" when I don't fight with fists. "I am a man" when I struggle with life non-violently. "I am a man" when I fight the cosmic powers with words, and not any word, but the word of God, our sword of the Spirit. Words are not just rhetoric, but words are power, the power of God in our mouths. This non-violent sword is not in our hands, but in our mouths and hearts. "I am a man," a person with dignity, honoring another's dignity, when I fight in this way.

There is a war on the streets and some want to win it with guns and violence, but with God this battle is won with peace. The shoes that are to be worn are not Nike, Converse, or Reebok, but any shoes that "will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace" (v. 15). A real man spreads peace, not war. The aim in the battle of life is peace. Black men can still fight, but with a divine word, a word that brings peace to stormy streets. Young men don't have to pull out a gun to wage war, but just need a word of peace to fight the powers. "I am a man" when I do this -- proclaim peace, something we all need. "I am a man." I do not have to beat a woman, or strut my stuff, or impress a posse to be a man. "I am a man." God's man. "I'm in the Lord's army. I just have to stand." Stand firm and speak words that can move mountains of hate. Preach peace, the gospel of peace. Walk in peace. Wear those shoes. Peace brotha. I won't try to take you

down in the street, but I'll lift you up in the Spirit through the word. Peace brotha. "I am a man."

Celebration

God provides what we need to fight in life. We can trust God's power and strength during life's battles. God empowers us to stand firm in the face of destructive powers. No weapon formed against us will prosper!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: The armor of God, men standing firm, the rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, and spiritual forces of evil, the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes, a shield of faith, helmet of salvation, sword of the Spirit, and the flaming arrows of the evil one; and

Textures: The sturdy armor of God, the weighty belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness.

III. Other Material for Use During the Sermonic Moment

- "Jesus did not choose the means of the Domination System. He did not choose coercion. He did not choose weapons or war—though some apparently hoped he would. In short, he did not choose violence. From the temptation to the cross, the only sword Jesus wielded was 'the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.'"¹
- You may consider using these words by Martin Luther King regarding non-violence and peace.²

"Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers." (p. 73)

"The past is prophetic in that it asserts loudly that wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows. One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. How much longer must we play at deadly war games before we heed the plaintive pleas of the unnumbered dead and maimed of past wars?" (p. 83)

- For more insight into what it means to live as a muted and invisible African American man, read [Invisible Man](#) by Ralph Ellison. This novel could be helpful in setting up the

historical context for contemporary perceptions and struggles of black men. Also helpful in this regard is the 2008 Princeton Seminary unpublished dissertation of Gregory C. Ellison, II titled The Unacknowledged Self: A Pastoral Theological Response to Muteness and Invisibility in African American Young Men (Ages 15-24).⁴

- A possible option for the sermon is to play with the scriptural motif of “stand,” by interweaving lyrics of Donnie McClurkin’s song “Stand”⁵ throughout the sermon or at crucial moments.
- Your Men’s Day message may be enhanced after you review this article about why many African American men do not attend church. Read John W. Fountain, “No Place for Me: I Still Love God But I’ve Lost Faith in the Black Church.”⁶

Notes

1. Campbell, Charles L. The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. p. 72.
2. Both quotations are found in: King, Martin Luther, and Coretta Scott King. The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr. Newmarket words of pocket edition series. New York, NY: Newmarket Press, 1987.
3. Ellison, Ralph. Invisible Man. New York, NY: Random House, 1952.
4. Ellison, Gregory. "The Unacknowledged Self: A Pastoral Theological Response to Muteness and Invisibility in African American Young Men (Ages 15-24)." Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2008.
5. Stand. Donnie McClurkin. Burbank, CA: Warner Alliance, 1996.
6. Fountain, John W. “No Place for Me: I Still Love God But I’ve Lost Faith in the Black Church.” The Washington Post. 15 July 2005: Page B01. Online location: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/15/AR2005071502194.html> accessed 30 January 2008