

Sermon for Septuagesima Sunday

Written by Larry Wagoner

All three of our readings for today, Psalm 20, Joshua and Second Timothy, all have a central theme and concern themselves with being a soldier for Jesus Christ and for the Gospel. All three encourage bravery, single mindedness and trust in Almighty God. The military metaphors are appropriate because we know that the church, from its earliest times, has been under attack from forces that wish to destroy it.

This is perhaps more true today than ever, with even our own government pushing policies that try to restrict the free practice of religion or force practices that are scripturally abhorrent to people of faith. Today's readings urge us to consider the disposition of these forces.

As Saint Paul will later comment in his epistle to the Romans..." *What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us...who can be against us?"*

Let's go back to Psalm 20 that we read together earlier.

"Some put their trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the Lord our God.

They are brought down and fallen: but we are risen and stand upright.

Save, LORD: and here us, O King of heaven, when we call upon thee."

Then again from Joshua 1:9

"Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage. Be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed, for the Lord thy God is with thee, whithersoever thou goest."

Finally from Second Timothy 2:3

“Thou therefore endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangle himself with affairs of this life: that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.”

Let us consider each of these exhortations. The chariots mentioned in the psalm reflect the power sometimes brought to bear against Christians. The chariot was, in its day, a fearful engine of war. It lifted the warrior against those he fought against, and gave him power and speed in battle. Chariots often were outfitted with cutting blades along their sides and could cut down opposing infantry like a scythe. They were the main battle tanks of the ancient world.

Horses trained for war would trample opposing soldiers. They, too, put their warriors above their opponents and gave them a tactical advantage in combat situations because of their immense strength and speed. These kinds of instruments were trusted by some according to the psalmist, but the Christian knows to hold fast instead to God.

“But we will remember the Name of the Lord our God. They are brought down and fallen; but we are risen and stand upright.

Save, Lord, and hear us, O king of heaven, when we call upon thee. “

Only God can be assured of victory in our battles against evil. Those who trust in the things of this world are bound to fail in the end, while Christians know that we *“are risen and stand upright”*. We can stand up against evil not just now but in all times to come, for we can rely on the Lord, the king of heaven.

In the Book of Joshua, we hear of the Lord speaking and urging him to be brave and follow His commandments.

“Have I not commanded thee? Be strong and of good courage, be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed...for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.”

The Lord had ordered Joshua to lead the people of Israel to cross over the river Jordan on the journey to the Promised Land, into the land of Canaan. Joshua, trusting in God, led the people forth. The command from God was not to just go...but to go forth with strength and courage.

Joshua was ordered to trust in God, the everlasting, who is faithful and is able to fulfill His promises to the people of Israel. We, too, are called to take on our daily tasks and live our lives with courage and strength. When we consider whose work it is we do...we can only find strength and courage.

We, like Joshua, are commanded to “not be afraid or dismayed”. We should never lose our confidence in God, no matter how dire the circumstances might seem to be at the time. The forces and situations against us often seem powerful, but compared to the might and power of Almighty God they dwindle to nothingness.

This is not to say that sometimes it is extremely difficult to battle onward. We are faced with unfair situations, hateful people, accusations that we are biased or judgmental or somehow that we are wrong when we say again and again, “No. God has told me that this is wrong, and it is wrong.”

We are told we should accept the unacceptable. That we should not object, and not give our voice when asked to do something we know is wrong. We might be shunned, called vile names or persecuted for our beliefs. When this happens, remember what Christ had to say.

“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Remember that Christ is with us always. As Paul counseled Timothy, *“Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Christ. “*

The soldiers of Jesus Christ must know that they will suffer hardness, afflictions and deal with evil. It is the nature of the battle we fight. Jesus told us we must take up our cross and follow Him. Our Lord and leader suffered and died upon the cross for us. We fight under His leadership and guidance. We fight the good fight of faith while we strive to be a good soldier of Christ.

It is a difficult thing sometimes to take on this battle. We get weary and exhausted. The spiritual battle makes us tired and pushes us to our limit. We consider whether it is better to make concessions in order to maintain some semblance of peace in our life. We look at what we give up, or who we give up, to fight the fight of faith.

The soldier for Christ does not concern himself or herself with the things of this world that are sacrificed for the service. As soldiers give up the general civil concerns to military service in a literal sense, those involved in spiritual warfare give up concerns of the world in the spiritual sense.

We do not entangle ourselves with the affairs of this life, focusing instead on the things of the time to come. If we are misunderstood and persecuted for our faith, what is the importance? How could any matter compare to the eternal issues at hand? It is truly said that no man can serve two masters. We are called to serve God and follow the gospel. We look to Him to support us in knowledge, strength and courage. With God at our side, we cannot fail.

Let us pray.

Lord, guide us always to fight the good fight of faith. Lead us, strengthen us, give us courage in times of peril and an understanding in heart and mind to follow your commandments always and in all things. In Jesus name we pray. AMEN.