

“The Invisible World Around Us”

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

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.

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.” [Eph 6.10-13]

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against...the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil... [Eph 6.12]

Now I know it isn't popular in today's sophisticated main line church culture to admit you believe in the devil, but the thing is you can't really call yourself a Christian unless you do. From the beginning of the Bible in Genesis, to the end of the Bible in Revelation, the devil plays an essential role. Take the devil out and the story no longer makes sense.

Now obviously we are not talking about a cartoon figure of a guy dressed in red with horns and a tail and a pitchfork tormenting people in hell, any more than when we are talking about God we're talking about a cartoon figure of an old guy in a white robe with a long white beard sitting on a throne in heaven.

When we talk about the main characters in the spiritual realm, we're talking about what Paul calls the spiritual forces of good and evil, what he describes as the “cosmic powers of this present darkness” which are diametrically opposed to God's cosmic power of light.

If you're like me, you didn't grow up giving much thought to this cosmic power of evil or even to the spiritual realm. In what we like to see as our sophisticated, civilized, educated culture, we sometimes feel we are above such primitive beliefs.

And yet all we need do is read about the atrocities committed in totalitarian regimes to understand that there is a powerful force for evil at work in the world, whether we like to admit it or not.

Because I wasn't taught about the spiritual realm much in church or in seminary, I didn't give much thought to it, and for years I didn't have a clue as to what it was all about. But three books have helped me get clearer on what the scriptures describe.

The first book was called A Present Darkness – the title coming right out of our scripture for today – and was a murder mystery written from a spiritual perspective by the Christian author, Frank Perretti. It was one of the few books I've read that was so captivating that I couldn't put it down.

I remember that because I was reading it on a Saturday night when I should've been getting sleep before church the next morning, and yet I couldn't stop reading.

Perretti told the story on two levels – a material level and a spiritual level.

So, for instance, the plot required that a certain letter get to a particular person by a certain time in order for a life to be saved.

And so in one chapter you would see how the letter was dropped on the floor by a postal employee, then picked up by someone else and put into a machine, and then the machine jammed and the letter was stuck, but then someone got it out, and then it was put into the wrong bin, and then fell out into the right one.

And then in the next chapter you would see angels and demons fighting a battle.

When the demons would strike a blow, the letter would fall or get jammed or be mislaid, but when the angels would successfully fight, the letter would be picked up or unstuck or filed correctly.

In other words the book explained how whatever we see with our earthly eyes is what's happening on the surface and material level.

But underneath that, there is a spiritual level where there is warfare going on between the forces of good and of evil.

You may have had experiences where through some strange “coincidence”

you or someone you know was saved from being in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's the kind of thing we're talking about here.

The point is: no matter what is going on in our lives, no matter how big or small, there is always a spiritual level to it.

The second book that was helpful is called The Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis.

How many of you have read that? If you haven't, do, because it is really helpful.

The story is told from the viewpoint of Screwtape, a highly placed assistant to the devil, and is all about how to tempt human beings from doing what it is that God wants them to do.

It explains how the more we resist overt and conspicuous temptation, the more subtle and wily the devil gets in order to pull us away from God and the abundant life God desires for us.

The book makes it clear how the devil is able to find our weak spots and capitalize on them, how the devil sneaks in under our radar, finds the chinks in our armor and causes us pain.

And that's exactly why Paul speaks of putting on the armor of God because if we are not armed against the devil, the devil can use us and we won't even be aware of it until it's too late.

It's like having cancer develop in our bodies, & because we aren't paying attention to the signs, we don't even know it's there until we're in big trouble.

But just as we don't talk much about this cosmic forces of evil or about the spiritual realm in general, we also don't talk much about spiritual armor.

To be honest, even though I have ancestors who have fought in every one of this country's wars,

and even though I'm grateful for their service and sacrifice, I'm not really into war or military operations or armor.

I used to hate reading the Psalms because they would say things like, "God, smite my enemies! Do awful things to them." I just couldn't relate to the general king.

But then I read a book called Andrew, You Died to Soon by Corinne Chilstrom,

the wife of The Rev Herb Chilstrom, the first presiding Bishop of our denomination, the ELCA.

Corinne wrote the book after their son committed suicide, telling the story of her journey through devastating grief.

The part that I will always remember is the part about the psalms, because she had felt as I did – that the psalms had no relevance to modern times, or at least not to her life.

But after Andrew died and she was suffering from grief & anger & shame & guilt & depression & despair, she discovered that those things were the enemies that King David was describing.

Perhaps sometimes he was talking about actual soldiers, but much, perhaps most, of the time,

David was talking about his internal battles as much as his external ones, as much about his spiritual battles as his physical/material ones.

And what Corinne discovered was that as she read these psalms, as she prayed them, she was able to name the enemies that were attacking her & destroying her & stealing the life & hope & joy from her.

And while the psalms began in anger and grief and lament,

they moved through those feelings to faith and healing and hope for eventual victory.

Yes, it was not just an emotional battle she was fighting; it was a spiritual battle.

The enemy was trying to steal her love & her joy & her peace & her patience & her hope & her faith from her.

And to stop the enemy she needed to arm herself with the armor of God

and fight to gain back her life. the life God intended and desired for her.

Whatever challenges you are facing, whatever battles you are waging, whatever struggles you are engaging, there is a spiritual dimension to them.

Whether it is physical illness, or mental illness – including anxiety and depression and even a negative attitude – or conflict in a relationship, or financial hardship – whatever the issue, there is a deeper level to your battle.

There is an invisible spiritual dimension underneath the material/physical issue that you can see.

And the absolutely crucial thing to understand is that trying to defend yourself or fight against such issues on a merely physical/material level, and not deal with the underlying spiritual issues,

is like treating the symptoms instead of the root cause of an illness.

And to win the underlying spiritual battle, we need to put on the armor of God & fight. But that's another whole sermon!

What I want to leave you with this week is this: what we see with our eyes is only the physical and material reflection of a greater, deeper, more powerful spiritual reality.

The challenges and issues and struggles that you face can never be won on the physical material level but must be fought on a spiritual level with spiritual armor and weapons.

And so, as you think about and consider and reflect upon the challenges in your life.

I hope you will begin to look a bit deeper, because the more we learn to fight out battles in the spiritual realm, the greater chance we have for victory.

Look for signs of what's going on in the spiritual realm of your life.

Pray. Draw close to God. And trust that in God you will have the victory. **Amen**