

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B 2018  
The Rev. Ian Burch  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
August 26, 2018

*As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.*

In the summer of 1989, a student-led and pro-democracy uprising took place in cities all over China. The protesters took to the streets in response to economic reforms implemented after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. These reforms seemed to benefit only the wealthy, the well connected, and the politically powerful. Students had been exposed to Western-influenced professors who had been lecturing at universities about political parties, free trade, and representative democracy. For these students, the one-party rule of China, and the rampant cronyism required a national response.

For those of you old enough to remember, the uprising was on every news channel in every country in the world. The Chinese government vacillated between accommodation with the leaders of the uprising and violent repression tactics. In the end, the Chinese government fired live ammunition into the crowds to disperse the more than one million protesters who had occupied Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Records vary wildly, but international watch groups guess that deaths were in the thousands, if not as high as ten thousand. The international community issued blistering condemnations over the violence of the Chinese government, and to this day, for anyone over the age of 35, Tiananmen square evokes a sense of dread and danger.

One photograph became emblematic of the entire uprising. In this photo, four massive war tanks are rolling into Tiananmen Square, and one man, probably a student, in a white shirt, stands in front of the tanks to block them from entering the square. No one ever found out who that man was, and he has been known colloquially as Tank Man. Tank Man stood, defenseless, in front of violent suppression from the state and became a stand-in for all the heroes of that uprising.

I wonder why that one picture of an unarmed man captured the imagination of the entire world. Was it his bravery? Was it his utter defenselessness in the face of coming violence? Probably both. I can't imagine doing what he did unarmed and unarmored.

*Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil....put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.*

This armor of God passage from the letter to the Ephesians has been a favorite of school children forever. I've seen countless skits or projects encouraging kids to cut out pieces of paper in the shape of breastplates or helmets and try on different parts of the armor that the author describes. It's a cute exercise, but I'm not sure that this is really a passage for children.

The community to which the author is writing – the Christian community in the city of Ephesus, and more broadly speaking, Christian communities all over Asia Minor fifty years after the death of Jesus. These communities know something about armor. Everywhere they look, they see the soldiers of Rome occupying their towns and territories – requisitioning food and supplies, conscription citizens into the army, and influencing the language and culture. Rome was the mightiest player in that part of the world, and the early Christians knew to be wary.

Why worry about Rome? After all, they brought with them good roads and a general sense of security? The Christian community at Ephesus could not be fully assimilated into the Roman Empire because the beliefs of the Empire conflicted with their beliefs as Christians. One of the core tenets of Roman life is that the Emperor of Rome is a god. And no new Christian could ever bow down to an Emperor or to say a prayer to an Emperor. This makes the Christians enemies of the Empire, and their unwillingness to bow makes them targets of persecution.

So, yes, the Christians knew something about military armor. They saw it on Roman soldiers in their towns every day, and they feared it when they met to worship Christ in secret.

So here we are reading a letter from antiquity that is encouraging an occupied people two thousand years ago to arm themselves, not with the arms of the occupier, but rather with the armor of God.

It might seem silly to keep reading this stuff, but I will tell you the truth: there is always a Rome. There is always a power in the world who tries to demand our worship and attempts to tell us who God should be rather than who God is. There are always Christians hiding from Rome. There are always students in the streets fighting tanks with nothing more than the shirt on their backs.

By all means, arm yourselves. But do it differently than the great empires of the world. Your armor is truth, righteousness, peace, and faith. The followers Christ go to war, but it is not a war that most governments might recognize. We fight with words and with love. We fight for the very least among us, because we know they are entitled to the full measure of God's grace. We fight for the victim and the leper because we know that they hold a special place in the heart of God. And we fight for this community, wherein God is present day after day, year after year. Faithful to us.

Those students wore plain clothes when they marched into the square and faced down an army. They walked wrapped in truth, righteousness, and peace. Maybe that's foolish, but there is a lot about our faith that is a little bit foolish. I would rather be a fool for God than a slave of the Emperor. I appreciate that Christians worshipping in secret or Chinese political dissidents might feel a little far from our own experience. After all, we worship in public and are not under imminent threat of death from the government. But these are the superheroes – these are the big players. What can we distill from their example for our everyday life? Where might we need the armor of peace or of truth in our own lives? Maybe the example is tiny, but the small things add up.

Wage a different kind of battle, my friends in Christ. Battle poverty, avarice, and hatred. Wrap yourselves in God and fight for those who need it. Be a Tank Man in your own place and time. We will not use the weapons of the mighty. We will instead trust in what God has promised us: truth, righteousness, peace, and faith. And these will be grace enough to change this world that often needs changing. Amen.