

POWERS OF THE AGE

Ephesians 6:10-24

A sermon given at First Covenant Church of Minneapolis

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Dramatic reading of scriptural text (Carina):

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour 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 armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 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. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus will tell you everything. He is a dear brother and a faithful minister in the Lord. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, to let you know how we are, and to encourage your hearts.

Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Introduction

I'm going to begin with a bit of honesty: Ephesians 6 is definitely not my favorite. In the verses immediately preceding today's passage, slaves are commanded to obey their earthly masters with an attitude of both "fear and respect" and "sincerity of heart." It would be impossible to calculate the amount of suffering that's proceeded from mishandling of those verses alone. But just after that, we get today's passage, which pushes a ton of my buttons. Biblical literalism. Christian superstition. Christian triumphalism. Violent, patriarchal interpretations of what spiritual struggle involves. For a good number of folks, the meaning of this passage is exhausted in the notion of "waging war" against invisible supernatural beings – demons - who are thought to be creatures something like this:

Demon
pic start

Dramatic reading of *This Present Darkness* (Maddy):

Drawing a charcoal streak across the sky, a sinister black object flew over the mountaintops and began to drop into the valley, piercing through the paper-thin layers of mist that hung in the air. Cloaked by oppressive spiritual darkness and silent as a black cloud, Ba-al Rafar, the Prince of Babylon, floated along. He stayed close to the contour of the mountainside, maneuvering on a course that weaved this way and that among the dead snags and rocky crags. The canopy of darkness followed him like a cast shadow, like a tiny circle of night upon the landscape; a faint streak of red and yellow vapor trailed from his nostrils and hung in the air behind him like a long, slowly settling ribbon.¹

Some of you will recognize that excerpt. It's from a novel called *This Present Darkness* by Frank Peretti. In the fundamentalist context in which my faith was first formed, this book was taken as near gospel truth. Sometimes, as a teen, I'd look up into the sky and try to see the invisible imps that were spawning things like liberals, feminists, and non-Christians.

Demon
pic end

More honesty. The Frank Peretti interpretation of “powers of the age,” of “principalities and rulers”— where there’s an invisible, sulfur-spewing, yellow-eyed demon sitting on every yoga instructor’s shoulder—this seems to me not just silly, but actually kind of dangerous. Dangerous why? Because it makes evil into a cartoon and spiritual warfare into a game of *Dungeons and Dragons*. There has maybe never been a more pressing time for Christians to think hard about evil and how to fight it. The demonic “powers of the age” – which I take to be profoundly meaningful *symbols* of the energies of destruction that are everywhere in our world – do seem to be gathering strength and stealing the hope of people everywhere.

So for the next little bit, I want to offer some thoughts on this business of “authorities” and “powers of the age.” Are they real? What might they mean today? And, crucially, how can these powers be resisted? Does biblical language of breastplates and swords (and such) actually help us?

The Historical Context of Ephesians

Like all educated people of the time, the author of Ephesians assumed the universe was organized in an up-down fashion: the visible, material world exists “down here,” while the invisible, spiritual world exists “up there.” When he looked up at the countless twinkling dots in the night sky, what did he see? He saw a panoply of awesome and terrible beings – beings with immense power over the fate of individual persons and history in general. And so, in Ephesians and elsewhere, biblical talk of angels, of powers, of rulers, of principalities, refer literally to these constellations of stars that hold humanity in their grip, deciding their fate with an invisible, often hegemonic, hand.²

Stars
pic start

¹ Frank Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 131.

² Paul Tillich, “Principalities and Powers,” 50-51.

Stars
pic end

This particular understanding of the universe is, of course, foreign to us. Science teaches us that stars are not preternatural beings; rather, they are spherical, luminescent concentrations of plasma held together by their own gravitational force.³ Does knowing the physical composition of a star diminish its mystery, its awesomeness, or even its spiritual potency? I certainly don't think so. But I'll be honest: I think this knowledge *does* make much less compelling a worldview in which immaterial winged enemies populate the heavens, wielding power over human hearts, minds, societies, and histories.

Thinking About “Powers of the Age” Today

And yet, there *is* something that resonates in many of us about New Testament language of “powers of the age,” of “principalities,” of “cosmic powers of this present darkness” that try to separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:38-39). 20th century theologian Paul Tillich says that these terms

... name the powers in whose bondage we all are and with us all [people] in all periods of history, and the whole of creation [. . .]. Who...does not feel the irresistible forces which determine our historical and personal destiny? They drive nations and individuals into insoluble conflicts, internal and external; into arrogance and insanity, into revolt and despair, into inhumanity and self-destruction. Each of us is involved in these conflicts and driven to a greater or lesser degree by these forces.⁴

No one can deny that there are energies at work in the world that crush human hearts and lives, that destroy God's good creation, that undermine even the most monumental efforts toward furthering truth, goodness, and beauty in our fraught time. Like the demons in the Peretti novels, they are larger-than-life and insidiously pervasive, but also *incredibly ambiguous*. This is for two reasons.

First, as Tillich points out, “powers and principalities” are hard to pin down because they're “simultaneously both glorious and terrible... full of beauty and full of destructiveness.”⁵ Knowledge, for instance, is a wonderfully creative force in our world. With it, we've fought diseases and sent people to the moon. But industrial knowledge has fueled a violent, immeasurably destructive conquest of Nature, and technological knowledge is making us into lonely screen addicts.

The second reason these powers are so ambiguous is that we can't fully externalize them; they're everywhere. We're in them. They're the air we breathe and the backdrop of our lives. Oh, *were that* God's enemies were clear-cut beings “out there,” separated from us and our pristine godly goodness. But it's not like that. The creatures causing destruction are you and me. A large part of what makes “powers and principalities” hard to discern is that we're partly at fault. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). All play a part in the energies and systems that oppose the Spirit of Life.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star>

⁴ Tillich, “Powers and Principalities,” 51.

⁵ Tillich, 54.

How can we get better at discerning—and, crucially, *resisting*—these powers? It’s a lifelong process of wisdom-seeking and spiritual strength-training, isn’t it? But I do find that real-life examples always help me learn and grow in my journey. So for the rest of our time here today, I want to talk about a major “power” of our present age, and highlight someone in our congregation who, every day, dons armor that helps her resist it.

Making it Real: Modern Capitalism

Capitalism
pic start

Where, honestly, would any of us be without modern capitalism? In the words of Fredric Jameson, “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”⁶ What do I mean when I talk about contemporary capitalism? I mean a global system of voracious profit-engineering, a system that...

- ... tries to control and contort everything imaginable to uphold the supremacy of the competitive marketplace. And I do mean everything, from hearts to rainforests to governments;
- a system that seeks to persuade us that individual self-expression and self-fulfillment are the highest good. Period;
- a system that obscures from our moral vision things like fellow feeling, civic engagement, and communal ties;
- a system that seeks to make consumerism the foundation of personhood, and consumption a requirement for living at all.
- a system that relies on calculated methods (like “PR tactics” and mass psychology) to alter our *desires*. What desires? you ask. How about: The quest for the perfect body, the dream of home ownership, the passion for trendy shoes, and yes, even the search for “spiritual enlightenment” (*Eat Pray Love*, anyone?) This means the pursuit of happiness and the very meaning of freedom become tied, in ways we’re not even aware of, to the function of mass markets;
- a system that has economic inequality a both a prerequisite and an inevitable outcome;
- a system that regards economic inequality as necessary for motivating people to work hard (to serve the mass market), and so *keeps on increasing* that inequality. *Ad infinitum*.

Among the many “powers of the age” or energies of destruction that we face today, capitalism is an extremely widespread and dangerous one. Now, it is absolutely true that any economic system has the potential to become crushing, and usually, eventually, does. Socialism has wrought similar abuses as capitalism; think of the impoverishment, and environmental degradation of many eastern soviet bloc countries. But of capitalism, pastoral theologian Bruce Rogers-Vaughn says that it “has become so pervasive, inclusive and powerful that it may be considered a global paradigm, or hegemony, and thus has the capacity to govern why, how, and from what human

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press (1991), 76. Quoted in Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, “Powers and Principalities: Initial Reflections Toward a Post-Capitalist Pastoral Theology,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 25, no. 2 (2015): 71-92, at 72.

beings suffer.”⁷ When I first read that, it sounded like an overstatement to me. But then I realized a lot of other people were saying something similar.

In his book *Progress or Collapse*, Roberto De Vogli writes this:

It is no coincidence that crises such as climate change and the rapid depletion of natural resources are occurring in combination with other symptoms of social breakdown: rising mental disorders, mindless consumerism, materialistic conformism, status competition, civic disengagement, startling economic inequalities, global financial instability and widespread political inertia. While these crises are usually studied in isolation, they are all interconnected.⁸

What connects these crises? The “market greed doctrine,” De Vogli concludes.

Capitalism
pic end

In the gospel of John, Jesus describes the enemy that stands in opposition to the abundant life he offers. This enemy, he says, comes to “steal, kill, and destroy” (John 10:10). If that is what the enemy of God’s kingdom does, then it seems clear that capitalism, at least as it has taken shape in our modern globalized era, is an enemy of Christ *par excellence*. It is a greed-driven “principality” that seeks to separate us from God’s love by *stealing* human identity, purpose, and hope; by *killing* efforts to restore societal order, sanity, and health; and by *destroying* our one and only planet with breathtaking speed and heartbreaking totality.

But let us not despair. Here in Ephesians and elsewhere, we are assured that, in Christ, there is victory over the powers of the age—our age included. It isn’t up to you or me to defeat this enemy. It’s too big. And besides, this is an enemy in whom we all participate. We must trust in a loving life-force stronger than death. That’s basically what faith in the Resurrection means. And while we aren’t called to manage the war, we *are* called to fight in the battles. And God has graced us with battle garb.

Yeah, OK, this is what the Bible says, you may be thinking. But what does it *mean*? What *can* it mean in the face of a principality like capitalism? What we need are examples of real-life fighters—people who, in their day-to-day, *live forth* Christ’s victory in creative ways.

Luckily, there’s Maddy Barsch!

Fighting the Good fight: Maddy Barsch.

Maddy
pic

This is Maddy. And there is Maddy, too [point]! Maddy has been attending First Covenant for eight years, and she and her husband Ezra have been members for two years. Not long ago, in a Sunday morning service, Maddy talked a little bit about her work. If you weren’t there that Sunday, or if you’re new since then, or if you just need a refresher, let me clue you in.

⁷ Rogers-Vaughn, 75. Emphasis in original.

⁸ Roberto De Vogli, *Progress or Collapse: The Crises of Market Greed* (London: Routledge, 2013). Quoted in Rogers-Vaughn, 76.

Maddy is a teacher, artist, and contractor, and her work revolves around sustainable fiber systems. In plain speak, that means “real clothes.” Clothes made from natural materials (wool, for example). Clothes made in ways that “do no harm” to people, soil, water, flora, and fauna. Clothes made the way they used to be made before the invention of things like polyester, rayon, and synthetic dyes. These petroleum-based materials have allowed clothing companies to produce mass amounts of poor-quality, unjustly produced, environmentally toxic, garments – garments that are purchased on the cheap, worn a few times, and thrown away. They then make their way to landfills, lakes, and rivers where they poison the soil, and seep microparticles of plastic into the bodies of underwater creatures. The synthetic clothing market is massive and growing. It’s expected to reach 88.5 billion USD by 2025.⁹ This market is a relatively small appendage of the modern greed-fueled hegemony of capitalism, but it’s wreaking colossal havoc in the lives of God’s people and the health of God’s creation. It is stealing, killing, and destroying.

Every day, Maddy puts on her armour, and she fights it. Hard. Let me tell you more.

Belt pic

Maddy wears the Belt of Truth. Let me pause to say that each of the photos you’ll see here are items of clothing in Maddy’s personal wardrobe – clothing that’s been either handstitched, and/or recycled, and/or repurposed. Thank you, Maddy, for the beautiful photographs!

In her various roles – through art, through education, through advocacy - Maddy shares *empowering truths*, truths that give people tools with which to live in creation-honoring ways through their clothing practices. At various centers, and through individual lessons, she teaches people things like how to purchase and spin their own yarn, how to support small farmers and minority farms, how to work with natural dyes, how to hand-stitch so as to mend rather than toss, how to look for new clothes with an eye to organic natural fibers and sustainable manufacturing processes.

Maddy also shares *prophetic truths*, truths that open eyes, that expose greed and desecration, that counter consumerist frenzy and waste. She tells the truth about how “the manufacture of polyester and other synthetic fabrics is an energy-intensive process requiring large amounts of crude oil and releasing [harmful] emissions.”¹⁰ She also tells the truth about how vulnerable people in the poorest parts of our world are impacted by “fast fashion” culture (buy cheap, wear twice, throw away). A Bangladeshi female garment worker makes \$34 a month working day in and day out in 12- to 16-hour shifts.¹¹ Such truths are frequently on Maddy’s lips.

Shirt pic

Maddy wears the Breastplate of Righteousness or Justice. In the Bible, righteousness has to do with the right and just ordering of things, especially relationships. Maddy has a passion for the right ordering of creation, for a disruption of unjust power that destroys. She describes herself as “not an angry person.” But when it comes injustices committed against the vulnerable, she gets riled up. When I interviewed her recently, she said this [I’m paraphrasing a bit]:

⁹ <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/press-release/global-synthetic-fibers-market>

¹⁰ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1964887/>

¹¹ <https://waronwant.org/fashion-victims-facts>

The Holy Spirit has laid on me this desire for equity – equity throughout the good creation that God has entrusted to us. I take this responsibility very seriously. I connect to God through [my work in sustainable fiber systems]. I speak truth to people, I fight the powers that be, and I battle the energies that try to eradicate the fruits of the Spirit. We all participate, knowingly or unknowingly, in the system. We can choose how to participate. We can have intentionality in how we choose to clothe our bodies. This is empowering.

Maddy's righteous garb challenges us and galvanizes us.

Shoes
pic

Maddy wears the Shoes of Peace. The principality of capitalism incites a lifestyle of frenetic striving, greed-motivated production, never-ending acquisition, and self-absorbed competition. Like a mother's "hushhhhh" to an anxious and overspent baby, the peace of God through Christ quiets the feverish way of being into which the powers of the age goad us. Living in God's peace means rest.

"Mindful stitching." I hadn't heard of this practice before Maddy shared with me that it's a thing, and moreover, that it's a thing she teaches to both children and adults. Mindful stitching, in Maddy's words, uses mark-making as a way to process thoughts. It's slow, rhythmic, calming. Hushhhhh Hushhhhh. It invites quiet time for prayer and reflection. It opens space and time for the artisan to be fully present in her making, to bring her full self to each stitch. Experiencing anything this in this mindful, embodied way – whether sewing, walking, or breathing – is a subversion of capitalism's hegemonic manipulation of our desires. "gotta get it! gotta know it! gotta do it! gotta solve it! NOW NOW NOW!!!" Mmmm-Mmmm [slowly shake head.] Hushhhhh... Hushhhhh...

Maddy's shoes of peace, ironically, deliver a kick in the pants to the frantic grabby rush of our age.

Coat pic

Maddy wears the Shield of Faith. When I asked her about ways in which her Christian faith informed her work, Maddy said this:

Faith is the driving force behind why I care so much. Eden or heaven is a beautiful, harmonious community between humans and animal and environment. We all give to this common mission, we all have worth. "Rising tides float all boats." I care so much because I feel like those are the things God cares about.

Faith means, among other things, a basic trust that something *other than* "this present darkness," something *other than* the sorrows and sufferings we know, is possible through God. At the forefront of Maddy's mind is this Edenic vision of peaceable shalom, so different from the waste, poverty, violence, and death that unjust economic systems bring to us. Like Mary the mother of Jesus, she dares to hope in a world where the humble are exalted and the hungry are filled and all are *well*. But hers is not a Polyannic vision. If you asked her if she believes this world is currently headed straight for utopia, I'm not sure she'd say yes. Her faith seems to me to be of the kind Paul Tillich talked about – it's a joyful, absolute trust in the One in whom all life is grounded, *in spite of* the life-denying evil and destruction that surrounds. Maddy has found the courage to embrace hope, to be a life-loving and life-giving person, in the face of a global

machine whose death-dealing often seems unconquerable. This is because she knows she is rooted in a power greater than life (and, most certainly, greater than death).

This faith, this confidence, is her shield.

Hat pic

Maddy wears the Helmet of Salvation. To be saved is to be ushered into a way of being no longer under the power of death, despair, want, and destruction. People, nature, social systems - all can be recipients of salvation. It is a gift from God through Christ, a gift spread abroad through Spirit-filled disciples.

Maddy does contract work for *Fiber Shed*, a nonprofit in northern California whose mission is to create fiber systems that are soil-to-soil. The motto is, “Local fiber, local labor, and local dyes.” Fiber Shed works for a world where fiber- and dye-producing plants are grown organically on healthy soil; where materials are processed at factories close to crops; where folks in the local community are hired to process, design, and mend clothes; where clothes are not tossed but composed so that they return to bless the soil whence they came. Maddy says her work at *Fiber Shed* is helping create a “web of connectedness in which everyone relies on each other and works together for the common good[.]” This is a very different approach to garment-making than the wider clothing market, which, in its need to raise the bottom dollar, spews death, despair, want, and destruction everywhere. Reliance on creature-killing chemicals. Shipping practices that dump carbon into the atmosphere. Unethical treatment of workers in sweatshops. All, of course, to raise the bottom dollar so the pockets of CEOs and shareholders are well-lined.

Our scriptures teach us that every good and perfect gift comes from God, the God whose offer of salvation knows no limits (James 1:17, Titus 2:11). This means that everywhere we witness “even a partial move” away from oppression and ruin, toward “mutual respect, reciprocal valuing, and sharing in solidarity with the dispossessed,”¹² there we see the redeeming power of our God. In her work for *Fiber Shed*, and in many other ways, Maddy wears this power beautifully. And she is a vessel for its dispersion.

Embroidery
pic START

Maddy wears the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. An energy of (re)creation and renewal fuels Maddy’s labours, giving them purchase in the world. This can only be from the divine Spirit, the Lord of Life.

Also, Maddy quite literally wears the Word of God. Late in 2016, feeling sad and frustrated with a great many things this country, she began an embroidery project that’s still in the works. On a beautiful cream-colored dress, Maddy is slowly stitching 1 Samuel chapter 8, in which Yahweh’s people demand a war-like king instead of trusting God. The project is pictured on the screens. When it is finished, Maddy intends to wear the dress and talk with people about how her Christianity stands in opposition to this kind of anxious demand, to this vision of dominating rulership.

As an important aside, this dress will be featured in an upcoming show at the Textile Center of Minnesota. The show opens January 10 (this Wednesday) and closes March 16.

¹² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 32.

Conclusion

I want to wrap up by first reminding us that the unifying theme of our current series on Ephesians is “grace is for everyone.” Although we all participate in the powers of the age (it is unavoidable), God’s unbounded grace means each of us has been given tools with which to resist these forces of destruction. Maybe the metaphor of battle garb works for you, and maybe it doesn’t. No matter. The point is that, through God’s Spirit, you, we, really *are* able to fight evil. What an amazing grace.

So, what’s your battle? We’re all fighting on multiple fronts, but what’s the principality whose destruction-wielding power just breaks your heart? What’s the one that stokes a holy rage? What’s the one that makes you feel utterly powerless? What’s your battle?

While the worship team comes up, I invite you to take a minute now to close your eyes, breathe deeply, and reflect prayerfully on this question. Hold the answer in your mind, because I’ll return to it in the benediction.

Benediction

Whatever your battle, may you trust that you’re kept by a truth greater than every deception; that you’re protected by a justice stronger than every wrong; that you’re sustained by a peace more profound than every chaos; that you’re safeguarded by a courage that wins out over all your fear; that you’re encompassed in a restoration sounder than every calamity; and that you’re empowered by an Advocate in Whom not just your battle, but the entire war, has already been won.