When "Putting On the Full Armor of God" Becomes a Dangerous Metaphor

I'm a big fan of metaphors. As a figure of speech, an image is used to symbolically represent something else. A metaphor is a comparison made between two or more things using figurative or descriptive language, not literal language. As a literary device, metaphors serve to make difficult to understand ideas or abstract concepts easier to comprehend, making them more vivid and interesting. The Bible, as you can imagine, is filled with metaphors that the authors used to help them describe their understanding of God, the people of Israel, Jesus, his followers, the Holy Spirit, scripture itself, and so many others. Here are a few examples, and note how bizarre the understanding would be if taken literally.

- My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (Psalm 18:2)

- Yet, O Lord, we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. (Isaiah 64:8)

- God shielded Jacob, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye. (Deuteronomy 32:10b)

- The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. (Psalm 23:1)

- You are the salt of the earth. (Matthew 5:13)

- Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. (Hebrews 4:12)

- Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Feed my sheep.' (John 21:16)

- Jesus said, 'I am the bread of life; those who come to me will not hunger, and those who believe in me will never thirst. (John 6:35)

Concerning Jesus' identity from the Gospel of John, there's also:

- I am the light of the word
- I am the door
- I am the good shepherd
- I am the true vine.

None of these examples, of course, are to be taken in literal way. **For there is a danger when the figurative language of a metaphor becomes literalized. And then worse, when it becomes absolutized, an unfortunate and often dangerous mistake in fundamentalism.**

How many people do you suppose, for example, still imagine God as an old gray bearded man sitting on a throne up in the sky somewhere? It's just a metaphor! **The damage done over the millennia by envisioning God strictly as a male king, thus setting up a patriarchal hierarchy, is immeasurable.** There's another metaphor that has had an enormously strong influence on Christianity – an often-negative influence, in my opinion. The author of the letter to the church in Ephesus (located in modern-day Turkey), sought to encourage the Christian community so that they could remain strong in their new faith. Many of you may already be familiar with the metaphor of **putting on the 'whole armor of God'.**

There have been countless children's sermons, perhaps even here decades ago, where the leader has dressed up one of the kids with a belt, a breastplate, shoes, a shield, a helmet, and a sword. While standing there like a cute tiny Roman soldier, the other children who gaze upon this sight are told that they are soldiers in a battle, a spiritual war against the devil.

It's horrifying, by progressive standards, by what many have done with this passage of scripture in formulating their approach to the Christian faith.

I know from which I speak, because I use to be one of them. There was a time when I would pray this verse almost daily. I was once convinced, like so many Christians still are today, that I was a **spiritual warrior for Jesus, locked in a battle not only with the forces of darkness and evil, which are real, but also with Satan himself, and his demons.** And you know what? When you think there's a literal demon lurking around every corner, it's not hard to convince yourself that you've found one – even within oneself.

As progressives, however, we know that there is a big down side to living a militaristic approach to a life of faith. **With such an ingrained mindset, it's not a big leap for many to becoming _militant_ toward those with whom they end up labeling as the enemy, or simply as the "other."** And in my experience, sooner or later that militant approach inevitably turns inward, unleashing and inflicting some serious psychological and spiritual violence on oneself. I would venture to guess that there are others here in our community of faith who have experienced something along these lines in your own journey of faith.

Submersing oneself in the language of warfare, battle, and spiritual arsenals can even cloud a person from being able to understand the true nature and character of God (which as Christians we primarily understand in and through the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus). Therefore, we have come to see the **nature and character of God as all about love and peace, not war and destruction.** And yes, I know God is often portrayed in the Old Testament as a Divine Warrior, causing or allowing one army or nation to conquer and destroy another. But that's a long explanation for another sermon, but let's just say it has lots to do with the lens through which God is perceived.

It's said that people in Jesus' day were expecting a militaristic Messiah, one who would lead the Jewish people to oust their Roman oppressors. While many people in our day and age expect the same type of Savior, that's not the kind of Messiah we ended up getting in Jesus. Yet, using the metaphor of **the Church as an "army of God"** is still common in many religious circles, especially here in the Bible Belt. But this

metaphor, when used as a model for ministry, has been misused and abused throughout the centuries. **Very real horrors have been, and continue to be, carried out in the name of God.**

In reaction to this particular militaristic approach to Christianity, others are trying to tone down this imagery. That includes our own denomination, the PC(USA). When the blue-covered Presbyterian Hymnal was published in 1990, and again when the newest hymnal was published in 2014, blatantly militaristic hymns were removed. The most popular one being "Onward Christian Soldiers" marching as to war.

But here's the twist. **Like all metaphors, militaristic language for God and the people of God isn't necessarily bad or wrong in and of itself. Rather, it's what people have done when literalizing and absolutizing that metaphor.** Not surprisingly, Jesus didn't use *any* military references when he talked about the "kingdom of God." But others certainly did. As we heard in the Old Testament reading from Isaiah, God is referred to as a kind of Divine Warrior, putting on the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation to bring about justice.

This particular metaphor for God was extended to the people of God by the author of Ephesians. And the Old Testament Israelites no doubt saw themselves literally as God's army, often fighting and killing those they considered not to be the "people of God." They justified violence against their enemies because they convinced themselves that their opponents were also the enemies of God. How convenient. Many still do that. To this very day, many nations, including our own, continue to be convinced of this "Just War" theory, first developed by Augustine in the 4th century, in order to justify war. And let's not get into the Inquisition today.

In Jesus' day, however, that militaristic imagery became less literal and more metaphorical, where the people of God were engaged more in a spiritual battle than a physical war. That was certainly the approach taken in Ephesians. Therefore, before we completely reject this militaristic metaphor for the Church we need to put it back into context in order to glean what may have been its original point. First and foremost, even though the author compares followers of Jesus to what would have been the common image of a Roman soldier, **Christians *aren't* told to attack and fight other people. Rather, they are commanded simply to stand fast and persevere. This stance was one of defense, not offense.** Putting on the 'whole armor of God' was meant to emphasize preparedness, alertness, discipline, and unity – the marks of any good military. But this was not to extend into the realm of violence. Yes, the image of a Christian 'soldier' is used in the New Testament, but it is never used as one of violence against other people, as has become more commonplace today.

Yes, there are elements of Christianity today that still embrace this dualistic frame of mind. **This "You're either with us or against us" approach to a life of faith makes it easier to dismiss, disregard, disrespect, and dehumanize others, followed by practices that can indeed inflict spiritual violence, and sometimes physical violence.**

The author clearly states, however, "**For our struggle is *not* against enemies of blood and flesh**," but against spiritual powers of darkness and evil (Eph. 6:12). Think of the darkness engulfing Afghanistan at this very moment, and other places where war and terrorism and oppression reign. **For do we not, as progressives, understand ourselves to be in a battle, of sorts, against the powers of injustice, prejudice, ignorance, and yes, the evil in our midst? Is it not also fair to say that we are in a spiritual battle against forces that divide, discriminate, and set people against each other?** In the context of this metaphor, these are among the demons we face around every

corner, not literal ones. Do not our own efforts in living a life of faith encourage us to **fight against oppressive structures in church and society**? Is it not a battle that we, as individuals and as a community of faith, have undertaken to **combat racism and white supremacy, homophobia and Islamophobia, sexism, as well as the ignorance that flows from a rejection of science and facts, especially when done for partisan political reasons?**

Do we not, especially through education, mutual support, and God's grace, seek to protect and prepare ourselves for the struggles we face, much like the metaphorical description of soldiers who gird themselves not with actual helmets, shields, and swords, but with truth, righteousness, faith, and the word of God? And perhaps **before judging others for their sins, we should try to understand the forces of evil influencing them.**

While I have a much better understanding, and even appreciation, for this metaphorical image of the Church as a spiritual army, and Christians as spiritual soldiers, I still think that Christianity has used this imagery to do **way more harm than good** – especially in perpetuating the concept of a literal devil named Satan in the 21st century?

So, when confronted with the negative effects of this often-dangerous militaristic metaphor, be reminded of its original purpose: "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." (Eph. 6:15). That part of the metaphor is usually forgotten or ignored. Perhaps, then, we may come to embrace an image as **soldiers of peace!**

May our love for neighbor and our commitment to peace and justice be our armor of God.

Amen.

Resources:
Austin Crenshaw Shelley, "Needing a Warrior God," *The Christian Century*, 8-16-21.
Ala Tincoco Ruiz, "Living By the Word," *The Christian Century*, 7-25-18.