

Needing a warrior God (Ephesians 6:10-20)

The armor of God and the violence of the Bible

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As a pacifist, I have often winced at the Bible's images of violence and war.

I struggle with God's role in defeating Israel's enemy armies. Weren't the Egyptians who drowned when the walls of the Sea of Reeds came crashing down God's children, too? And what of God's beloved ones who inhabited the promised land before Jericho's walls fell? Moreover, why did God command that Israel's enemies be completely destroyed once they were defeated in battle? It is often difficult to reconcile these violent histories with a God of love and liberative justice.

And it's hard to hide from the fact that much of the Bible depicts bloodshed, gore, and abuse, even outside the arena of war. Consider Jael's driving a tent peg through Sisera's skull (Judges 4), the dismemberment of the Levite's concubine (Judges 19), or the beheading of John the Baptist (Matthew 14, Mark 6, Luke 9).

All of this violence littered throughout the broad sweep of the biblical narrative leads me to feel especially uneasy when the Bible employs metaphors that seem to encourage a posture of wartime readiness, as in this week's epistle reading about the armor of God.

When I was a seminarian, I expressed my disdain for military references and my preference for the Bible verses that paint a vision of peace. "I tend to prefer the image of beating swords into plowshares and the vision of the wolf lying down with the lamb to those of waging war," I said.

I was caught off guard by what happened next. Gentle and measured came my classmate's reply: "You prefer verses about peace because you have never needed a warrior God."

I was gutted. My classmate was a Coptic Christian from Egypt whose home church had been the target of a terrorist bombing. He had needed to pray to a God who would fight on his behalf and protect his family and church from harm. He began to tell the class about the Egyptian Muslims who showed up on Christmas Eve to form a human shield around the sanctuary to defend the church from further acts of terror on a high holy day. The rest of us sat in stunned silence as he talked for the remainder of the class.

Two years later, our family would learn that our third child was to be born with significant medical challenges. Over the course of the next four years, she would need multiple medical interventions, including hospitalizations and life-saving surgeries. Over the span of those same years, I began professional pastoral ministry and discovered that there are many and varied circumstances in which the people of God seek a warrior who will protect and fight for them as they battle addiction or anxiety, depression or disease, regret or rage.

I still hope and pray, though, that when God shows up in the midst of these battles, God will look less like a warrior equipped to fight and more like the Egyptian Muslims who put their bodies on the line to protect other children of Abraham. May the armor of God be our love for neighbor and our commitment to peace.