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Now and Not Yet

How many of you have ever fought over the temperature of a thermostat? I know I have. With my parents, who I always felt kept our house at a temperature suitable for a tropical greenhouse, or with my husband who insists our house be kept at a climate suitable for the penguins of Antarctica. Either way, you know what I am talking about. It's one of the most classic arguments, and it is such a fascinating one too. Because you can find yourself inhabiting the exact same space at the exact same time and yet find that it feels vastly different to you than it does to the other person. How is it that I can feel cold in the same house my husband feels comfortable, if not a bit warm, in? Or how is it that I can be boiling hot in the same house with my parents who are bundled in sweaters and blankets?

It is the same, psychologists would argue, with the way we view the world. In fact there is a physiological term for this, coined by Lee Ross, a late physiological researcher from Stanford, entitled the fundamental attribution error. Which points out our illusion of objectivity, i.e. I have a sense that what I perceive as reality is the only reality which exists. And it makes sense that we as human beings would think this way, given that we all perceive a real world with color (blue sky, green grass) and solid substance (floors, ceiling, pews), allowing us the rightful assumption that the way I perceive things is the way they really are. Therefore when others perceive things differently it is difficult for us, as individuals, to comprehend their point of view, or more specifically their world view. While, we might be justified in assuming that the way I view the world is the way you view the world, that just isn't true. We are a vast and varied, complex and diverse human species. Which is why we can exist in the same space and time and climate as another person and yet comprehend it as cold or warm when they comprehend it as warm or cold. We also all come from different backgrounds, varied family units, religious institutions, cultural contexts, social constructs, and on and on and on. It isn't bad, but it is necessary to understand the fact that as human beings with different viewpoints we are apt to see the world as fundamentally different from one another.

There is a concept in the Christian faith, that we live in the world of already and not yet. Which I believe our author from Ephesians is speaking to this morning. Already Jesus has come, God incarnate has lived and moved and walked among us; suffered, died and risen again; even taken evil head on, looked death in the face, and vanquished the powers of the devil. Ensuring that goodness reigns, life wins, and the kingdom of heaven is here and now! And yet, we know that this world is flawed, sin continues to exist, and the devil (however you interpret it) still appears to be waiting for us around every corner. So how are we, as Christians to live into this already and not yet? What does it mean to be faithful to Jesus who lived, and died, and rose again, who gave us eternal life, but still requires us to exist in this passing, flawed, and chaotic world here and now?

Maybe more so, what does it mean to live into the already and not yet of our worldviews. Already do we comprehend that others view the world through their own lens, not yet do we appreciate, understand, or even acknowledge the vast and varied lenses that exist in this world. Already do we know that we have had the opportunity to experience the kingdom of heaven here and now, not yet do we know if all have accessed that experience, or even more so that world view. Remembering the wise words from our letter

to the Ephesians this morning as our author reminds us that “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.” And while that concept, of cosmic powers and present darkness, may seem foreign or antiquated, or even a bit woo woo, I think that this is not only a helpful reminder, but even more so a key aspect of our faith. That being that “Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh”, we are not meant to be fighting against one another, but against something else entirely. Especially in light of the fact that this passage has been used within and throughout the history of our church to support, justify, and promote Christian warfare and violence. With all this in mind, as our author encourages us, what might it mean to “Put on the whole armor of God, so that [we] may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” Because I do not believe our author is calling us to take up literal arms or war or violence, but to take up something else entirely. Something maybe even harder, more dangerous, and certainly more life threatening; at least, I would dare to say, threatening to life as we know it.

Think for a moment, what would it mean for us to put on the armor of God? What would that look like, given all we know of our God, the one who created this world and all that is in it. The one who from the very beginning called it good, not just good, but very good. The one who saved us from our own destruction over and over again throughout all of our Hebrew Bible, despite however many times we turned away or forgot or denied God’s presence and goodness. The one who came and walked among us, who ate with us, tended to us, cared for us, and loved us, all the way to the grave and beyond. The one who said from the cross “forgive them for they do not know what they do.” The one who went down to the dead to bring us back to life. The one who sent his spirit to ignite our lives and world with tongues of fire, as we were given the gift to hear one another and become a part of the body of Christ. What would it be like to put on the armor of this God? Would it allow us, maybe, to see the beauty of this world and call it good? Or to have compassion on those around us, even if they turn away from whatever we may think is right or good? Or to care for those around us, to feed them, and walk with them despite what others may say? Or to forgive them? Or what about to listen, and hear them? Might it look like living into a world where the kingdom of heaven is breaking in, even though we know it isn’t here yet?

Over the next two and half months, as we may find ourselves in a bit of a contentious environment, I pray that we might remember what it means to put on the armor of God. Which for me, right now, means acknowledging that we all come from different contexts and we all hold different worldviews, and so my armor, I believe, will look like listening, like leaning in closer, and like making space and room for others to live and move and have their being. Because, we are not in a war against one another, we are in a war against, as our author of Ephesians put it, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, which I would argue, right now, look a lot like division and deceit. We live in a world of already, in and as much as we have experienced already the kingdom of God, and so we are called to share it, to bring it, to spread it with the world around us.