

Be Strong

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Ephesians 6:10-20

When he was four years old, our son Evan would wear a Superman costume. As we went about our daily life, whether in the housing complex where we lived, or out and about running errands, he would wear it everywhere. His best buddy, a little blonde-haired Danish boy, was Batman. They would spend all day long together, these two little superheroes, with all that is evil no doubt withering away just by their very adorable presence!

But we all know it's not that simple. In my social and professional circles, talk of cosmic powers of evil usually only occurs when we're talking about literature and movies: like the defining movie of my generation - Star Wars. I'll never forget the very first time I saw Darth Vader on-screen with his full black face mask, menacing black cape, James Earl Jones voice and sinister breathing. Or think about Harry Potter's arch enemy, Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters, seeking to rid the world of Muggles and rule the world himself. Think The Dark Knight and Heath Ledger's chilling and sociopathic portrayal of "The Joker."

In privileged segments of society, we don't talk about evil much, not directly, and certainly not in the sweeping way that the letter to the Ephesians does: cosmic powers of this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil. Few if any of us talk of evil personified as the classic wily devil. We talk about brokenness, we talk about the world being a messed up place, we talk about wrongs and more, but I often sense, and feel myself, a reluctance to talk about evil.

Yet we love these movies that deal with it. They are the biggest hits of all time. We want the Jedi to defeat Vader and the Empire. We want Harry to vanquish Voldemort once and for all. We want Batman to beat The Joker. We are engrossed and engaged in these stories, I think, because the struggle feels fundamentally true to us. Even though we're rightly cautious about dividing the world into the binary categories of good and evil, and even though we may not think about our faith as in opposition to forces of evil, these stories resonate with an innate understanding that it does exist, that it's fearsome, it wreaks death and destruction, and it dehumanizes.

Maybe we don't name evil because it's so hard to define. Ted Loder says that though the reality of evil is evident, it's also elusive. We know what it does, yet it's hard to pin down a definition of what it is, because, he says, "Evil doesn't apply to some special species of monsters. It applies to ordinary run-of-the-mill people like us. Its reality is commonplace. That's part of why evil is so elusive; it lurks where we don't think to look."¹

¹ Ted Loder, *Loaves, Fishes, and Leftovers*, p.

William Sloane Coffin wrote that “disguise is the essence of evil. Doing an evil thing doesn’t make a person evil. But calling the evil good, believing the disguise - that’s when real trouble begins.”²

In a recent issue of *The Christian Century*, Alma Tinoco Ruiz tells a story that illustrates this disguise. It’s the story of Rodolfo, a young man from a small town in Mexico that’s a breeding ground for sex traffickers. Rodolfo became a pimp when he was 15. While in prison for sex trafficking, an interviewer asked him, “When is the first time you heard that a man can make money by selling the body of a woman?”

“It is a family business,” he said. “Since the boys are ten or 11 years old, they say that they want to be like their fathers, pimps. . . . So, practically, you will end up doing...only what you know.” In many cases, whole families are involved in sex-trafficking. Kids see from early on that “women are merchandise men can buy and sell as they will....They do what they know.”³

We need to recognize where evil is lurking (in Loder’s words) and how it has disguised itself. For the sake of the world, we need to name it for what it is, and where it is, and where we see it. Why? Because naming it takes away the power that comes with its mysteriousness. And when we take its mask off, we can begin to respond. It’s why good leaders will name the elephant in the room - because it’s hard to deal with what we refuse to name.

So let’s name it. Let’s name structural racism an evil disguised as a geographically based system of schools that keeps black and brown children separate from white children. Let’s name concentrated poverty an evil disguised as a concern for real estate values, keeping low-income housing away from the suburbs. Let’s name mass imprisonment of young black men an evil disguised as the war on drugs. Let’s name anti-immigrant fervor an evil disguised as a concern for national security. Let’s name the cover-up of abuse an evil disguised as a concern for the institution. Let’s name outright, bald-faced lying and deception for political and ideological gain an evil disguised as “different truths.”

Let’s name it. Let’s name the reality that we are all in the middle of this great deception. Let’s name it, and then let’s look to our sacred text for how we can respond. And the response suggested to the early church was not one of aggression, but of resistance. Sarah Henrichs says this is a survival strategy for persons of faith in a hostile world, not a strategy for aggression.

Remember, the early church was a minority people whose allegiance was to Christ, when the Empire and its soldiers around them demanded allegiance to their Caesar. Yes, the imagery is military, but Scripture turns that image on its head. The imagery of a soldier’s battle armor on a minority people is not unlike a four-year-old wearing a Superman costume, saying “I’ll save you, Mom.”

The rhetoric of this text sounds to me not like a letter, but a sermon given by one of the great preachers in the black church tradition. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

² William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*.

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<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/august-26-ordinary-21b-ephesians-610-20-john-656-69>

Put on the whole armor of God. Take up the protective gear of God. Stand firm, and fasten the belt of truth. Put on the bullet-proof vest of righteousness. Put on the boots that proclaim the gospel of peace. Take the shield of faith. Take the helmet of salvation. Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray at all times. Keep alert. Persevere in prayer.

Friends, this is a charge to the whole church, collectively. Melinda Quivick says while these pieces of armor “constitute the garb of an individual soldier, in the context of serving as equipment for prayer, they are the armor of the church as a body. We wear these gifts together. We “stand therefore” (verse 14) shoulder to shoulder as Roman soldiers would do, as today’s riot police do: an impenetrable wall of strength.”⁴

And if we look even closer, there is so much good news in this text: It is God’s power that strengthens us, not our own human power. To borrow extensively from Frederich Buechner, human power relies on “the sad wisdom of the world which knows that dog eats dog, that the gods help those who help themselves and charity begins at home.” Human power relies on the “breastplate of self-confidence because if you have no faith in yourself, if you cannot trust to your own wits, then you will never get anywhere.” Human power relies on feet “shod with the gospel of success—the good news that you can get just about anything in this world if you want it badly enough and are willing to fight for it.” Human power relies on “the shield of security because in a perilous world where anything can happen, security is perhaps what you need more than anything else - the security of money in the bank, or a college degree, or some basic skill that you can always fall back on.” And human power takes “the helmet of attractiveness or personality and the sword of wit.”⁵

However, we are to put on and take up and proclaim truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God. Which sounds like a lot of theological jargon to keep theologians and preachers in demand. But at their essence, at their core is one thing: for us in the Christian faith, they are all decisively made known to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus is our lens, our interpretive guide. As Christians, we know God’s truth through the life of Jesus and what he said. We know how to live rightly by looking to what Jesus would do. We know real peace from the Jesus who said, My peace I leave to you. We know faith by trusting in the God made known to us in Jesus Christ. We know salvation is God’s work of healing and wholeness, past, present, and future, through the life and work of Jesus. And we know the word of God through the Living Word, the Word made Flesh, Jesus.

So when we see structural racism built into our schools, we remember Jesus said, “Let the all the children come to me - black and brown and white and every ethnicity together, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” And then we respond together.

When we see concentrated poverty in our city, we remember Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” And then we respond together.

When we see mass incarceration of young black men, we remember Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and to let the oppressed go free.” And then we respond together.

⁴ Melinda Quivick, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1380

⁵ Frederich Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/>

When we see anti-immigrant fervor, we remember Jesus said, “ I was a stranger and you invited me in.” And then we respond together.

When we see institutions protecting perpetrators of abuse or fraud, we remember Jesus turned over the money tables in a corrupt institution. And then we respond together.

When we see lying and deception, we remember that Jesus said, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples;and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” And then together we resist the normalization of lying, and speak God’s truth to those who abuse their power.

Friends, in a world where wrong disguises itself with the cloak of respectability, our call to be the church is as urgent as ever. Let us be the church the world needs, strengthened in the Lord and in God’s power. Let us boldly reclaim Jesus, and pray together, proclaim the gospel of peace together, and even resist together. Amen.