

Ephesians 6:10-20

John 6:56-69

August 26, 2018

“Weapons of Mass Protection”

Blast From the Past movie with Christopher Walken, Sissy Spacek, and Brenden Fraser. Its about a naïve man that comes out into the world after spending 35 years in a nuclear fallout shelter. If you haven't seen it it's a funny movie. Its set in 1957 and Christopher Walken's character builds a nuclear fallout shelter in his backyard fearful of a Russian invasion. On the night of the Sputnik satellite launch he takes his family into the fallout shelter and accidentally locks them inside for 35 years. During those times however, as I'm sure many of you were aware, everyone was afraid and fearful of what may happen.

Today, there's no disputing that these are fearful times for many people. Apparently, the business of bunkers and panic rooms has picked up considerable since 9/11 and has continued to be robust even to the present. It seems instead of a Cuban Missile Crisis there's some worry that North Korea's missiles could now reach the North American coast...the dangers are all around us.ⁱ

Nevertheless, I think few churches would go for the idea of a panic room in the parsonage - or even for some "come one, come all" shelter located somewhere in the church itself. I mean, imagine the committee assigned to decorate *that*.

But, more deeply than that, I think we resist the idea of church as a shelter. At least that kind of shelter. On some deep level, if church becomes a shelter, it seems as if it diminishes our sense of church as a sanctuary, as a place that's set apart...as a place that stands for something different than the changes of our political life, even when they get scary.

Church as we imagine it seems to embody a different kind of ideal. It isn't just a big panic room.

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In John's Gospel, there is an early moment when Jesus gives a particularly hard teaching and abruptly loses many disciples, and so he finally asks the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" And Simon Peter answers, "Lord, to whom can we go?"

There is no panic room we might hole up in. There is no safe space where we might wait out the chaos until your teachings sink in. But it's more than that. It's that the gospel life seems to embody a different kind of ideal, too. And it's that ideal that the Apostle Paul is getting at in his famous words to the church at Ephesus, when he admonishes them to "put on the whole armor of God." Paul is writing to a church that would have eagerly embraced even the most bare bones kind of panic room, had there been one. Paul is writing to a church that knew oppression, in a dark time for Christians all across the Mediterranean.

The churches that met in the catacombs of the Empire did so, in no small part, because even Roman soldiers were reluctant to go after dark in the places of the dead. But not so for Christians, who resisted that kind of superstition as part of the old mind, the old self, the old ways in which they needed to turn away from.

Nevertheless, if you can't hunker down physically, there are any number of ways you can hunker down mentally...and indeed, spiritually. Just because you're willing to worship in the relative safety of a creepy catacomb doesn't mean that you are *truly* open. And for Paul, that represents a much more serious danger.

"Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh," he says, "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" (Ephesians 6:12).

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"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," said Franklin Roosevelt in his first inaugural address, and there is some truth to that even today. While there are real things to fear, for sure, the deeper danger is what our worst fears can make of us, no matter how remote they may be.

For years, we have heard that, statistically, fear of crime far outruns the actual likelihood of crime in almost every place. This is what keeps the people who build panic rooms in business.

It's not the enemies of flesh and blood who seem poised to undo us, even as they try their worst, so much as the power of our own worst fears to warp our perspective. And make no mistake: fear has the power to warp our perspective so completely that we can no longer distinguish friends from enemies, or find a way to work for tentative understanding, much less peace.

And yet, to read Paul's letter to the Ephesians, it's clear that this is not a new problem.

Paul's message is to name where true strength and security are to be found.

Many years later, the Heidelberg Catechism (used in teaching protestant Reformed Christian doctrines) would think of it this way: "Question: What is your only comfort in life and in death?"

"Answer: That I am not my own, but belong - in body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ." It's the question behind every panic room, and an answer worthy of Paul, himself.

Paul's own answer is an invitation to the church to arm itself - to become soldiers, but of a particular sort - soldiers who "belong - in body and soul, in life and in death" to Jesus. This means not only following a different Lord. It means taking up different tool/weapons. Instead of the armor of fear, he invites the church to "put on the whole armor of God."

- A belt of truth, instead of leather.

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- A breastplate of righteousness instead of metal.
- Shoes that make them ready to lead the charge for the gospel of peace.
- The shield of faith. The helmet of salvation.
- The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

What is it that will save us? For Paul, the armor of the world is not the answer. To his way of thinking, panic rooms don't keep us safe. They keep us scared. The only way to safety is to seek the peace of God, the peace that passes all understanding, and that means suiting up to engage the world.

Knowing it is hard. Knowing it is risky. Knowing that the work of transformation is slow. But also, that it's good. And vital. And full of grace. It means following Jesus and taking up his tools. The tools that build. The tools that nourish. The tools that heal. The tools that teach.

I think that throughout our lives, we get caught up in many kinds of arms races. We learn to defend ourselves with words even more than fists, (In St Augustines Confessions, he realizes this- that his words are weapons) and with defensiveness and anger more than swords or guns.

We set up perimeters into which we permit no incursion, based on the baggage and the wounds we carry. And then one day, we find that we are all alone in a panic room we've built brick by brick, and day by day.

We're capable of surviving indefinitely, but we're no longer truly living. This is not what God wants for us. It is not what God needs from us.

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Paul's challenge to us is to lay down our fears...to remember that we are not simply our own, but that we belong body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful savior, Jesus Christ - the Son of God, who bursts down the doors of every prison, even the doors of death itself.

Let us pray.

Lord, there is so much in our lives that tempts us to hole ourselves up - to wall ourselves in - hoping this will keep us safe forever. But you would lead us out and remind us that we are precious in your sight. This is what matters. Encourage and support us so that when you knock, we are sure to open. Amen.

i From <http://day1.org/>