

“Advent as Warfare: Three Entities on the Battlefield”

Ephesians 2

November 29, 2020 (First Sunday of Advent)

Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service

Pastor Nicoletti

Our text this morning is Ephesians chapter two.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

^{2:1}And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—³among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

¹¹Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—¹²remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²²In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Most Merciful God,

In this season of Advent, we remember that you are a God who comes to his people.

You drew close in your interactions with your people, Israel.

You drew close in your birth and incarnation.

You will draw close on the last day when you come back to the earth in power and in bodily form.

And you promise us, that you also draw close now, by your Holy Spirit, when your people are gathered, and when we come to your Word.

This morning, we, your Body, are gathered.

This morning, we, your Body, are attending to your Word.

And so, we ask you now, Christ, to come among us, and speak to us, mold us, and shape us.

We ask, Lord Christ, that you would do this for your tender mercy's sake.

Amen.

This Sunday begins the season of Advent.

And it may be best to start with a few thoughts on Advent itself.

In the secular culture around us, the season of Advent is mostly seen as an extension of Christmas. But that is not how the historical season of Advent has functioned for the Church since it first emerged in the early centuries of Christian worship.

The Church year is something that, of course, is not commanded in the Scriptures. But it is based on Scriptural patterns. In the Old Testament, the People of God worshipped on a weekly calendar, gathering every Sabbath. But they also worshipped on an annual calendar, with several annual feasts, each of which focused on some theme of God's saving work.

The Christian Church, in its early centuries saw value in this pattern, and while it is a matter of Christian freedom, they found it to be wise for the people of God to structure some of their worship in an annual pattern as well, with seasons of the year focused on the different major acts of redemption. So, at Christmas, the incarnation is celebrated, at Epiphany the revelation of Jesus's identity to the world is celebrated, in Lent and Good Friday the suffering of Jesus is remembered, in the season of Easter the resurrection of Jesus is celebrated, forty days after Easter Sunday the Ascension of Jesus is celebrated, and ten days after that the pouring out of the Holy Spirit is celebrated at Pentecost. This is the major arch of the church calendar: giving special times throughout the year for the People of God to especially focus on certain themes of redemptive history, and walking through the great saving works of God every year, just as God called Israel to do.

Within the church calendar, Advent has an interesting role. It is technically the beginning of the church year – the church year starts today, with the first Sunday of Advent. But Advent has historically been a season of overlap.

Its major focus is the “advent” of Jesus – the “coming” or the “arrival” of Jesus. And because *that* is the theme, this season has historically focused on not just one, but three saving acts of God.

On the one hand, Advent looks back at the incarnational coming of Christ – the coming of Christ to the manger. As the beginning of the church year it is a season of preparation for Christmas and the nativity, and a time to reflect on how the people of God waited for the incarnational coming of Christ.

But on the other hand, historically Advent also looks forward to the final coming of Christ – his coming in power and glory to make all things new, to defeat all of his enemies, to make his

people whole, and to dwell with them forever. In this way, Advent also functions as the end of the church year – encouraging us to wait and look forward to the final saving act that God will perform at the end of history.

But then, third, along with that, Advent is also a season of considering how Jesus comes to us now, by the Spirit, in this time we now live in, between the first coming in the Nativity, and the final coming in power and glory. In this way, Advent functions as a picture of our lives, which are lived out in the in-between – looking backwards, looking forwards, and watching and waiting as we strive to be faithful in the meantime.

It's for this reason that Fleming Rutledge makes the claim that "of all the seasons of the church year, Advent most closely mirrors the daily lives of Christians and of the church, asks the most important ethical questions, presents the most accurate picture of the human condition, and above all, orients us to the future of the God who will come again." [Rutledge, 1]

Last year at Advent we focused on the theme of *how* Christ comes: We looked at how Christ comes in humility, how Christ comes in power, how Christ comes to comfort, and how Christ comes to call us.

This year I want to consider Advent – the coming of Christ – as an act of cosmic warfare. That will be our theme this Advent.

Now, that may sound like a downer. With all the conflict around us right now, why would we want that? Most of us are ready for warm fuzzy Christmas themes – we're ready to get the decorations and the Christmas carols out early, and we want something cheerful, not a month of sermons on conflict.

And I feel that too. And the warm and fuzzy parts of Christmas and Advent *do* have a place.

But as I read and thought about the themes of Advent, I became convicted that this might be the theme we need right now. We might need Advent to orient us to the right conflicts, so we can put other conflicts in their right place, and so navigate life in an age of conflict, oriented toward the coming of Jesus.

And so that is our outlook for Advent this year. We will return to the Gospel of John in January.

My central claim is that Advent is an act of war. And our focus this morning is on rightly recognizing the factors involved on the cosmic battlefield.

To get the framework of the battlefield right, we need to recognize three things:

- First, we need to rightly recognize the entities on the battlefield
- Second, we need to recognize the multiple layers of the battle
- And third, we need to rightly recognize the power relationships on the battlefield.

So the entities, the layers, and the powers.

That's the plan. And to see that we will consider Ephesians chapter two in light of the themes of Advent.

I. RECOGNIZING THE ENTITIES ON THE BATTLEFIELD

So, the first thing we need to do is to rightly recognize the entities on the battlefield.

And there is a lot of preaching in our culture all around us about who the primary entities are on the battlefield of the world.

And while those voices might disagree vehemently – even violently – about which side of the battle is good and which side is evil, most of them agree that the two primary entities are two groups of people. Two groups of human beings.

Whether the primary dividing line is over economics, or race, or political party, or cultural tribe, or moral priorities, or something else, many voices proclaim to any who will listen in our culture that the cosmic battle between good and evil is between one group of human beings and another group of human beings.

And whether we realize it or not, we can find ourselves falling into this way of thinking too. We too can think of the primary entities of the battle for our world as different groups of human beings.

But, of course, if we are Christians, and if we take the Bible seriously, then we know that cannot be right. Because such a view acts as if God does not exist.

And so, many of us reorganize things into two new entities. One is God and the other is the human being.

When we think of our own lives, we think primarily about us and God. When we think about other people, we see the central dynamic in their lives as between them and God. And when we think about the world as a whole, we think about the world and God as the primary actors. In each case there are two agents at work: God and humanity.

And that is certainly more Biblical than the first view. But it's still not enough, actually.

I have recently began reading Fleming Rutledge's book on Advent. So far it is an interesting and helpful book. There would be several points of theology and church polity where most of us would disagree with Rutledge, but her book on Advent is thought-provoking and has certainly been a help to me so far – it's already informed the main point of this morning's sermon and this year's Advent series.

And Rutledge makes this point – she writes: “Many people who will be reading this [...] have grown up assuming that there are two actors on the biblical stage: God and the human being.” [Rutledge, 14] As a result, “The Christian faith is presented as a rather static two-party transaction in which God presents himself to us and then stands back and lets us decide what choices and responses we're going to make. The emphasis is on *us* – *our* projections, *our* strategies, *our* decisions. God may be looking on as an interested, caring, and indeed loving spectator, but still a spectator.” [Rutledge, 123] This means, she writes, that “the presenting symptoms [in the world] of injustice, corruption, rapacity, exploitation, oppression, ‘battle, murder, and sudden death’ are owing to the failures of the human being to live up to his or her potential. In such a picture it is easy enough to introduce the idea of free will that is so beloved

by Americans. But this is not the biblical picture at all. The New Testament presents us with not two but *three* agencies: God, the human being, and an Enemy who is variously called Satan, the devil, Beelzebul, ‘the prince of the power of the air,’ among other biblical designations. It has been given to this Enemy to enslave humanity, and indeed all of creation, until such time as God sees fit.” [Rutledge, 14]

And we see that here in Ephesians 2. Humanity and God are mentioned here, of course. But so is Satan. We see this in verse two where Satan is referred to there as “the prince of the power of the air.” [Hodge, 98-99; Rutledge, 123; Wright, 19]

Satan here is not described as a minor actor in the world, but he is referred to instead as a prince – as a power, as a ruler. Why is he referred to this way?

Church Father John Chrysostom asks the same question: “Why does he call the devil the ruler of this world? Because virtually the whole of humanity surrendered to him. All are his voluntary and willing slaves. Few pay any heed to Christ, who promises unnumbered blessings. Rather they follow after the devil, who promises nothing but leads them all to hell. He rules in this age, where he has ... more subjects than God, more who obey him rather than God. All but a few are in his grasp on account of their laxity.” [Chrysostom, “Homily on Ephesians” 4.2.1-3 (quoted in Edwards, 121)]

Satan rules in this world because many follow him. And Chrysostom emphasizes that one need not be active or intentional to be a servant of Satan. You can be a servant of Satan, he says, “on account of [your] laxity.”

But how can that be?

I’ve been reading, on-and-off, Ron Chernow’s biography of George Washington. And this question reminded me of the position many Native Americans found themselves in in the conflict between the British and the French over the Ohio Country. The Native Americans did not face one European force, but two European forces in conflict with one another.

Which meant that whatever they did would affect the other side. To aid the British was to hurt the French. To allow the French unhindered passage was to harm the position of the British. Between two forces on the battlefield, there was no obvious possibility for neutrality for many of the Native American tribes. Even their laxity towards one side was an act against the other.

Of course the analogy breaks down in a few ways. Unlike us before God and Satan, the Native Americans had skills in guerrilla warfare that the other two sides lacked. And unlike our spiritual situation, neither possible ally before the Native Americans was overwhelmingly concerned with their wellbeing.

But in one important way the situation was similar. For we find ourselves between two great forces. In this world a battle rages between God and the Devil. And we are in the middle. Life is the battlefield. And so nothing we do will be neutral in life. Should we fail to resist one side, we will be aiding the other side. And should we get in a skirmish with one side, we will be aiding the other.

Because one side is working for our good, and the other for our destruction, you’d think we’d be wholeheartedly devoted to the benevolent force. And yet we are so often resistant to him.

And when we resist God's calling on us in this life, we are not merely holding back in a place of neutrality – we are aiding God's enemy, the Devil. And if we work for the purposes of God, we should expect the Devil to count us as his enemies and strike against us.

That is the dynamic, though, because there are not two forces on the battlefield, there are three: there is God, there is the Devil, and there is humanity.

And that is the first thing we need to recognize about the battlefield.

II. RECOGNIZING THE LAYERS OF THE BATTLEFIELD

Second, we need to recognize the layers of the battle.

Because our text from Ephesians 2 reminds us that the battle between God and the Devil is not just going on at one layer, but at multiple layers.

Ephesians 2 highlights three levels in particular.

The first layer is that this battle takes place in the world. The world, we read in verse two, follows the prince of the power of the air – Satan rules over the world.

But God is at work. He is pulling people out of their willing enslavement to the Devil and making them his own. That is what Paul talks about in verses four and five. And so, the war wages on in the world.

But the same war also wages in the Church. We see that in verses eleven through twenty-two. There the Apostle Paul is dealing with the issue of sinful divisions within the Church – ways that members of the Church are acting contrary to the unity God is working for in the Church. The immediate context is the unity between Jew and Gentile, but even as we move beyond that controversy and on to the debates of our age, the dynamic remains the same: the Devil is always waging war within the Church in order to tear apart those whom God has united together.

The basis of such divisions may change, but the battle itself does not. As Jesus works to unite his Body the Church, the Devil works to sinfully divide it. This is a second layer to the cosmic war we see in our text.

And the third layer is in each individual human heart.

And this one is important, because amazingly, this is the one we may be most prone to miss.

We are so ready to see ourselves as all good, and to see the influence of the Devil only “out there” – outside of our hearts and minds – that we do all we can to deny or ignore this layer of the battle. We see the battle lines in the world, we *maybe* see them in the Church, but we see ourselves as obviously on the side of good.

But that is not what the Bible tells us is true of us.

Of course we each have a primary allegiance – a dominant allegiance. For those who have truly embraced Christ by faith, their primary allegiance is God. For those who have not embraced Christ, they remain primarily allied with the Devil, whether they believe in him or not, because they have resisted the kingdom of God alongside him. But even with that primary allegiance, every human heart, in this life, remains divided.

For those who have not embraced Christ, while they are, as Paul says in verse one, “dead in the trespasses and sins” in which they walk, still, as Paul tells us in the beginning of Romans, they bear God’s image, and they cannot help but hear the testimony of his image in their hearts and minds. They are divided.

And for those who have embraced Christ by faith, though they have, as Paul says in our text this morning, been made alive together with Christ, been saved by grace – been raised up with Christ – still, the entire Scriptures affirms that they are far from perfect, their hearts remain divided, and the tug towards sin is one they far too often give in to.

As Feodor Dostoevsky put it: “The devil is struggling with God, and the battlefield is the human heart.” [Dostoevsky, 108; Rutledge, 15]

That means we must each remain vigilant, first and foremost, about the state of that war in our hearts.

Rutledge points to J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* as a story that illustrates what this looks like.

While some speak of *The Lord of the Rings* as if it were a simple battle between good guys and bad guys, Rutledge points out that any who view the epic story that way have seriously missed the point. One of Tolkien’s main points is that the battle between good and evil runs through every heart, and so every person must remain vigilant. [Rutledge, 124-125]

The story revolves around a ring of power – a magical ring that gives great power, but also brings great temptation to evil. And the wisest characters of the novel are the most aware that they too are susceptible to its temptations.

One example of this comes early on, when Frodo, who has been entrusted with this Ring, tries to give it to Gandalf – a wise and powerful wizard who is trying himself to work for the forces of good.

Frodo, recognizing his own short-comings turns to Gandalf and says “You are wise and powerful. Will you not take the Ring?”

Gandalf, who had been sitting, springs back to his feet and cries out “No!” He goes on: “With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly. [...] Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good. Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength.” [Tolkien, 61; Rutledge, 124-125 (Gandalf is not the only wise one who sees this battle in his own heart. [e.g.: Tolkien, 365-366])]

Gandalf knows that even as he pursues a good cause in the world, a battle wages in his own heart, and he can be tempted to evil means in his pursuits of initially good ends.

Gandalf lives his life with the knowledge that the battle between good and evil is not just “out there”, but it is in his heart every moment.

Do you know that?

Do you live your life as if that is true?

Are you as wary of temptation?

Do you see the danger – the temptation – of giving in to evil even as you pursue something that is itself good?

Because the Devil would often be happy to let us win an external battle for good in the world, if it means we will lose the internal war for our souls in the process. That is a trade he has made many times. We must recognize all the layers of the battle.

So, first of all, we need to recognize the entities in the war, which are God, the Devil, and humanity. Second, we need to recognize at least three layers to the war: it takes place in the world, it takes place in the Church, and it takes place in each one of our hearts.

III. RECOGNIZING THE POWER RELATIONSHIPS ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Third and finally, we need to recognize the power relationships on the battlefield.

Because these three forces we have been discussing are not on equal footing.

First, of central importance, is the fact that Satan – the Enemy – is far too powerful for us. Our inability to break free from serving Satan as his slaves is described in the first three verses of Ephesians 2. Hear them again – Paul writes:

“¹And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

We were enslaved. We were dead in our sin. We were powerless. So we read in verses one through three. But look at how verse four starts: “But God.” Fleming Rutledge draws attention to those words. She writes: “When you hear those two words, ‘but God,’ in the New testament, tune in, because you are about to hear the good news.” [Rutledge, 125]. And so we do. Paul writes:

“⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—”

God acts. God intervenes. God arrives. Which is what makes this an Advent sermon. Because at the very heart of this text – at the heart of rightly understanding the cosmic war we live in, at the

heart of Advent – is the fact that God shows up and God acts. And when God acts, God is victorious.

Our hope – for our hearts, for the Church, for the world – is not in our own power or our own programs, but in God, who shows up.

And seen from this perspective we must appreciate that God's arrival – his Advent – is an arrival in enemy territory. It is an invasion into the territory held by the prince of the power of the air – into territory held by Satan.

And that is true in all three of his Advents.

As we look back to the Nativity – the coming of God in the birth of Jesus Christ – we must recognize that his birth was an act of war. It was an invasion into territory occupied by the enemy, with the goal being that through his life, his death, and his resurrection, Jesus would overthrow the prince of the power of the air.

There is much that is warm and fuzzy and lovely in the celebration of Christmas. But it is also an act of war – an invasion – and we should never lose sight of that because that is the source of our hope.

The coming of Christ in the Nativity is an invasion into the Devil's territory.

And the same thing is true of Christ's coming today. When Christ comes today, by the Holy Spirit, to work in the world, it is an act of invasion into enemy territory.

The world may be in rebellion against God – it may be aligned with the Devil, whether it realizes it or not – but we serve a God who comes, who invades enemy territory. And every conversion – every time a new person comes to trust in the Lord, every time a person passes from spiritual death to spiritual life – Christ, by the Holy Spirit, in the pattern of Advent, is invading enemy territory a bit further. And so our hope in converting an unbelieving world is not in ourselves, but in the God of Advent who will show up to reclaim lost men and women for himself.

Don't misunderstand me – we are called to evangelize. But the reason we can do so with hope is because the power of conversion is not in us, but in the spiritual advent of Jesus in the world.

The Church, marked as it is by division and sin, has its own problems. Within the Church the Enemy has his strongholds. And when we see that, we can become discouraged. We can feel powerless to change the Church – powerless to make the Church what we know the Church should be. And we often feel that way because it is true.

Now again, don't misunderstand me, we each are called to work for the peace and the purity of the Church. But none of us have the power to bring about the peace and purity of the Church. Instead, the only reason we can pursue the peace and purity of the Church with hope is because we serve a God who shows up – we serve a God who will invade the Enemy's strongholds within the Church and will overcome them. And so we work, with hope, for love and truth to reign in every aspect of the People of God, because we know that the power to purify and unify the Church is not in us, but in the spiritual advent of Jesus within his Church.

And, of course, with the world and with the Church, our hearts too are not what they should be. Our hearts may be turned in on themselves, prone to evil, to idolatry, to sin. And when we see that, we can become understandably discouraged. But once again, our hope is not in our power, or the power of our congregation, or the power of our theological tradition, or the power of some great author or leader. None of those things have the power to win the battle of our hearts.

And yet, we are each called to engage in the battle of our hearts – to do all we can to dedicate our hearts to the Lord and to seek to see every aspect of our hearts in submission to him, loving him and loving our neighbors – uprooting sin and cultivating virtue in its place.

We are each called to that, though none of us has the power to do it ourselves. Because once again the reason we can pursue spiritual growth, sanctification, maturity, Christian virtue – the reason we can seek, as Paul calls us to in verse ten, to walk in the good works that the Lord has called us to, is because we believe that we serve a God who shows up – a God who will invade the Enemy’s strongholds within our hearts and will overcome them. So we devote ourselves to the means of grace, we strive to resist sin and lay hold of virtue, and we do it with hope – not hope in ourselves, but hope in the spiritual advent of Jesus in our hearts and lives.

Jesus, in his advent to the nativity invaded the Enemy territory of this world. Jesus, in his spiritual advent now invades the Enemy’s territory in the world, in the Church, and in our hearts.

And finally, Jesus, in his final advent – in his final coming in glory – will complete his invasion and victory over all things: of our hearts, of his people, and of this world. Sin, death, and the Devil will be conquered once and for all and be cast away forever – not by us, but by Jesus Christ, the God who shows up.

That is what Advent is all about.

Advent is an act of war. It is the foundation for our hope for our lives, for the Church, and for the world.

And so, as we look back to the incarnation, as we look around us at the spiritual battles we face, and as we look forward to the coming victory of our King, let us trust our Lord, let us take our place on the battlefield, and let us fight the good fight for the kingdom of our God, trusting in his power and in his work.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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