

Struggle against the POWERS



Ephesians 6:12

Doves are used in many settings as a symbol of peace. Peace doves are usually white, but is it possible for us to consider a chalky light brown Eurasian Collared Dove with a narrow black crescent around the nape fitting the symbol?

31 October 2021
Ephesians 6:10-20
Peace Combatants
First Mennonite Church

Almost every time I read the Bible, I have this feeling that I'm reading something written a long time ago and from a culture profoundly different than my own. Ephesians 6:10-20 is one of these passages, especially verse 12: *For 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.* Isn't this language odd, not to mention unscientific? What in the world is Paul talking about? Cosmic power? Spiritual forces of evil? How do we make sense of this language in our 21st century lives?

Before I attempt an answer to these questions let's keep in mind that Paul, an ambassador in chains, is writing this letter from prison.

Imprisoned by the power of the Roman Empire, of which he was a citizen. Of course, Paul knew about power. As an educated rabbi, he knew the power of books and knowledge. He knew the power that he himself had once wielded against early Christians, rounding them up and putting them in prison. He also knew the power of an encounter with God, an experience on the Damascus Road that left him temporarily blind and transformed him from someone who persecuted Christians to someone who followed Christ. He knew the power of a crowd whipped up against him and the power of a faith community formed as people responded to the gospel. And he knew the power of chains to secure him in prison and the power of the Empire to eventually put him to death.

Here at the close of the letter, Paul seeks to give some final words of encouragement and council. Now, you may recall that chapters 1-3 made some astonishing claims. Near the beginning, we are told of God's strategic plan for all creation, which is *to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth* (Ephesians 1:10). Everything in the cosmos will be gathered up by God, reconciled and restored to how God intended it. And God has created a new humanity out of all those old animosities—the church is the new humanity, God's new society here on earth, empowered to live in new ways.

If you only read the first 3 chapters of the letter you might conclude that in the face of such soaring claims, there's no more struggle against evil either in the world or in our own lives. But we have ample evidence in our own lives and in our world that evil is still prevalent. Evil forces are at work.

God's victory in Christ can't be taken away, but God's enemies haven't fully and finally surrendered. It's like when a war or battle has ended but there is still some mopping up to do, like victorious soldiers going door to door and cleaning up pockets of resistance. Not a very Mennonite image, is it? Here in Ephesians 6, the church is enlisted and equipped to stand on God's side in this continuing battle.

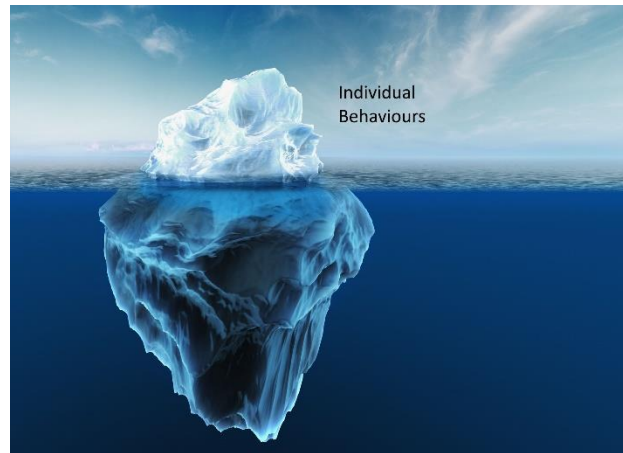
Paul is writing to people who have accepted the power of Christ in their lives, but people who also know the very real powers that oppose them. He says, *“For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”*

What are these “rulers,” “authorities” and “cosmic powers” of which Paul writes? There is the **personal dimension** such as lying, cheating on your taxes, stealing and whatever our sins that we may commit on a personal level. But we know that sin is even wider, deeper, and broader than that, right? We know that evil is a power that corrupts human authorities and institutions. Good things given to us to live joyfully and safely can be corrupted. This leads me to my second point: these rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers are also **systemic**.



What do I mean by systemic? To help me explain, I want to draw your attention to this doctored image of an iceberg. It basically shows what I was taught about icebergs—that 10% is above the surface of the water while 90% lies underneath the surface. There's a bit of the iceberg you can see, but there's a lot you can't!

Let's take FMC as an example. Imagine FMC is like this iceberg. What can you see? Many things. You can see a rather large building with a small and aging membership. You can see people engaging our local community through FIM. You can see some women sewing quilts. You can see people donating various items for MCC Relief kits or items of food for the Food Bank. You can see people who not only like to start meetings on time but feel the need to come early! You can see an institution that has a constitution and set of by-laws that shows how this institution operates. These things you can see. They are all above the surface.



But what about what's underneath the surface, all the things you can't see? This is much more difficult, right? What about the attitudes of women towards men or men towards women? Last week, I looked at patriarchy, the notion that God ordained men to be in control of family, society, and even the church as one assumption that lies underneath the surface. I noted how the system of patriarchy profoundly impacts our

theology, how we read the Bible, our attitudes, and these things impact our behaviour. Also, we are, by and large, a Caucasian European congregation. We aren't ethnically diverse. Does that say anything about how we view people who look different than we do? Or how do you read and understand the Bible? Are there some passages or sections of the Bible more important than others or does every word, verse, and book in the Bible carry the same weight?

You see, these invisible things are all underneath the surface, yet they influence our behaviour above the surface. These under the surface assumptions and attitudes are common to our existence as the air we breathe, and they influence our behaviour. They are tightly woven into our structures and ways of doing things to the degree that we inherit it as much as we create it. Fish don't recognize the water in which it swims—so also, we struggle to see the reality of the systems in which we live.

According to the New Testament scholar Walter Wink, these systems, these cosmic powers are forces which are very real, but invisible. Human beings never operate in a vacuum. We are always part of a culture, a society that has its own way of living. Every institution we are part of—whether it be the company where we work, the school that we attend, the neighborhood we live in – even the congregation we are part of – has its own spirit, its own culture, its own ethos.

This is just an aside, but have you ever noticed who John, in the book of Revelation, addresses when he writes to the seven churches in Asia? He doesn't write to the pastor, the congregational chair, or the deacons, but to the church's angel, its messenger, its spirit, depending on which English translation you read. Ever notice that? To the **angel** of the church in Ephesus...to the **angel** of the church in Smyrna...to the **angel** of the church in Pergamum...and so on for seven times.

What this suggests is every institution we are part of has a spirit. And sometimes that spirit, or culture, or ethos can be constructive for our faith, sometimes it may be neutral, and sometimes it can be evil.

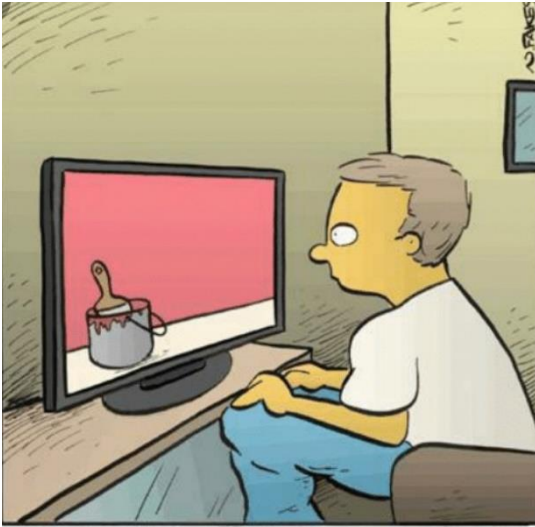
I want to give two examples to help clarify what I mean.

First is a story of my Korean friend, Jae. When I lived in China, I got to know Jae and worked with him and others in NE Asia on two different peacebuilding projects. I learnt about his passion for peace and reconciliation amongst many countries in NE Asia, and especially between his country of South Korea (SK)¹ and its enemy, North Korea (NK)².

What was so fascinating about Jae was how he became involved in the work of peace. When Jae finished high school, he, like every other male in South Korea, was called up for 3 years of compulsory military service. His job was to stand in a lookout tower on SK's side of the demilitarized zone and look through binoculars at a soldier in a tower on the NK side of the border. Jae watched how long the soldier stood in one place, watched how long he took breaks, watched what he ate, when he drank, and any other movements that soldier made. He wrote all these things down and hand them over to his superiors.

¹ The official name is Republic of Korea. I used the popular name as most people don't know the official name.

² The official name is Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea. I used the popular name as most people don't know the official name.



Though hesitant at first, Hank orders the 'Watching Paint Dry Network' offered exclusively through his satellite provider

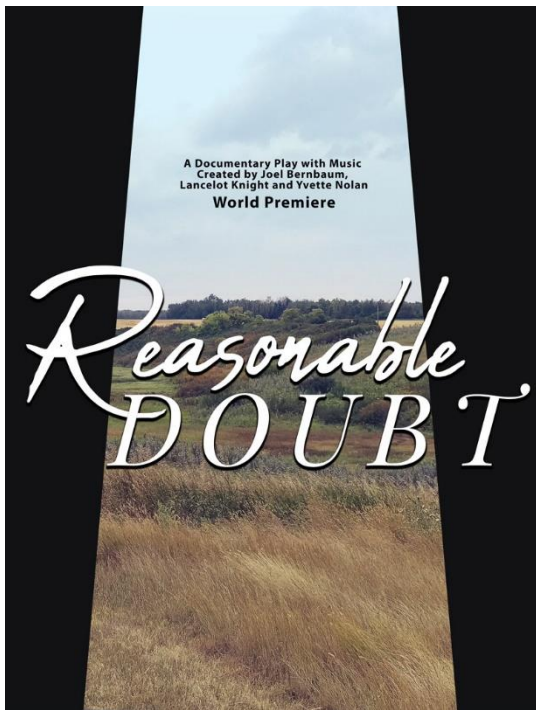
Imagine do that for 3 years! Job satisfaction is right up there with watching paint dry, don't you think?

During this time, Jae thought about the NK soldier. What was his name? How many siblings did he have? What were his hobbies, his favourite food? It then dawned on him that if SK and NK would go to war again, like they did during the Korean War in the 1950s, his first job would be to kill that NK soldier he was watching. His country told him that that NK soldier was his enemy.

Jae learned two things. **First**, he didn't have anything against that NK soldier. He didn't even know him, so how could that person be his enemy? **Second**, Jae learned that it was the Cold War militaristic structure that he and everyone else on the Korean Peninsula lived under dictated not only who his enemies were, but how he, as a SK, should behave towards someone from NK.

So, a ruler, authority, and cosmic power that Ephesians talks about could very well be a militaristic system that tells us who are enemies are. These are powerful forces that lie underneath the surface profoundly influence our attitudes, and how we think. These powerful unseen ideas influence what happens above the surface—our behaviour and actions.

This revelation led Jae to explore his faith more deeply. He travelled across the Pacific Ocean and attended Canadian Mennonite University in Wpg. He then went on to Eastern Mennonite University for a master's degree in Peace and Conflict transformation. He now uses the skills he learned at these Mennonite schools in his peacebuilding work in Korea. To put it in Ephesian's language, Jae is peace combatant, putting on the armour of Christ to **wage peace** against the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. His peacebuilding work is launching an assault on the cosmic powers that rule the Korean Peninsula.



My second example is about racism. Back in February 2020, a month or so before the start of the pandemic, Kathi and I went to the Persephone Theatre to see the play **Reasonable Doubt**. In 2015, playwright and journalist Joel Bernbaum was commissioned by Persephone Theatre to gather interviews with local citizens for the purposes of writing a documentary play on race relations between European settlers and indigenous people. Then, in 2016, when Colten Boushie was fatally shot on Gerald Stanley's farm near Biggar, SK, the play changed course. It also wove together actual interviews with the written testimony from Gerald Stanley's murder trial. It was powerful.

Before the play began, Kathi and I attended a panel discussion at the theatre. The discussion that evening was about racism in Saskatchewan. People on the panel noted that SK is a diverse society. They pointed to SK's Crest which contains our motto as proof: *Multis e gentibus vires*. This is Latin for **from many peoples, strength**. In other words, our province wants us to embrace, live up to, and see diversity as one of our greatest strengths. Yet the panel noted how racism and discrimination remain a very real, underlying, and unfortunate reality in our province. There are people in our province who are marginalized and oppressed by racism. They face daily challenges on both personal and systemic levels.



One stunning story that evening came from one of the people who works at the Open-Door Society. She was surprised by how newly arrived refugees had the same negative attitudes as the rest of society towards indigenous people. So, she asked some of her clients how this could be. One recent arrival told her about when they arrived in Saskatoon for the very first time. Their hosts met them at the airport and took them in a taxi to their new home. As they drove along, they got into a conversation with the taxi driver. When he found out that they were new arrivals, the taxi driver proceeded to tell them about the city and the kinds of people who were good and the kinds who were bad. Who were the bad people? **Within 10 minutes** of arriving in this city, these newly arrived refugees were being influenced by powerful unwritten assumptions about a specific group of people!

Or consider the example of the hospital in Joliette, Quebec, where a nurse and orderly mistreated and neglected Joyce Echaquan, an Indigenous woman in need of medical care. Joyce died in hospital but not before she recorded the staff as they mistreated her.

On our iceberg, the behaviour of the medical staff is what we can see – it resides above the water line. Indeed, the hospital administration dismissed both staff following the media eruption related to this case. But, you don't wage peace against, or dismantle racism simply by dismissing a couple of people. Why? Because the ruler,



the cosmic power of the institution hasn't changed. The issue of racism at the hospital will not change until the assumptions and powerful ideas that lie beneath the surface are also changed. This means changing not only the policies and procedures of the hospital but also these assumptions and powerful ideas that allowed racist behaviours to flourish unchecked until caught on video.

*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers, so we must arm ourselves in **peculiar Christian ways** so that we can wage peace. Paul instructs us in the following three ways:*

First, we are to stand against the schemes of the devil. Stand is repeated four times in this text. Stand against the wiles of the devil, withstand on that evil day, stand firm. Don't be distracted but stand your ground.

But Paul says note the enemies **are not** flesh and blood, meaning that the enemies are **not human beings**. Our enemies are not the NK soldier (or SK's if you're a supporter of SK) nor the two-healthcare people in Joliette. Christians are never enlisted to wage war against human beings. We engage in a struggle against those enemies that enslave us and turn us away from our true calling to serve Christ.

Stand is not a defensive posture either. Mennonites often discuss what it means to be in the world and not of the world. Much of our history has been one of withdrawal from the evil world so that we can be the quiet in the land. Stand is not a defensive posture. To stand is to take on the power of the armour of God to enable believers to resist the wiles and the strategies of the devil. A resilient courageous victorious

standing is one of the most important ways in which we grow into maturity in Christ. So stand firm.

Second, put on the armour of God. It's not our own armour, it's not our own intelligence, although we should make use of all the wisdom at our disposal. But we're asked to put on God's armour. What it means is, put on the new-self God has created you to be. We sang the hymn last Sunday new earth, heavens new. New men and new women. New community. A new heaven and new earth. God's equips us with God's Spirit and fills us with God's power so that we can resist.

Community is given 6 items to put on. Put on truth, righteousness, proclaiming the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God. These aren't programmes but gifts. Relational gifts. Gifts given to us by God to wage peace against the cosmic powers together. So, putting on the armour of God is nothing more than putting into practice these gifts with which we live in the new world created through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God's new world has dawned and we know where it's headed. Let's live in this world by putting on Christ.

God will win the victory in unconventional ways. God brought peace into the world through Christ on the cross. This is how God wins the war. God brings peace to the world through Christ showing the world God's character, and how to live in the world.

So it's crucial to recognize that putting on the armour of God prepares us to be peace combatants. Live in peaceful ways. Speak the language of peace. But, be firm in resisting all those things that ARE NOT lifegiving, resist things that do not lead to abundant life.

Stand firm. Put on the armour of God. Our **final spiritual gift is prayer**. Prayer too is part of the battle. Not sure if you've ever thought of it that way. It's also a way of staying alert. Prayer is used 6 times in these last 3 verses. Prayer is crucial to our waging peace. Whenever someone asks you to pray for them, the church becomes stronger because we are opening ourselves up to one another to the healing grace others can offer us through prayer. When you invite others to pray you and everyone grows in faith, power, in the ability to stand firm.

We have an unconventional enemy. It's one we can't see, yet it's very real. Let's use the gifts God has given us to be combatants for peace. Amen.