

Be prepared to meet the enemy

Ephesians 6:10-20

August 26, 2012

A few items in the news the last several weeks ...

Anders Breivik was sentenced Friday, declared sane by the court and given twenty-one years in prison. Breivik is the young Norwegian who, thirteen months ago, killed seventy-seven people, most of them teenagers, setting off a car bomb in Oslo and shooting up an island summer camp.

A report came out of Aleppo, Syria, this week that its citizens are being bombarded daily by government air forces, resulting in the death of dozens of its inhabitants, including many children. The airstrikes are seemingly indiscriminate, often targeting people standing in line for bread. If they stay in their homes, they starve, but if they venture out to get food, they risk being killed.

On Friday, a US drone attack killed eighteen people in North Waziristan, Pakistan, one of seven kill missions conducted in the region just this week. There have been several hundred such unmanned airstrikes made against suspected militants inside Pakistani territory over the last three years, killing several thousand people .

Three weeks ago, on a Tuesday evening, the state of Texas executed Marvin Wilson, a black man convicted of participation in the murder of a police drug informant. Marvin Wilson had an IQ of 61.

What do these four events have in common?

First, they all involve acts of violence. They all involve the deliberate taking of human life, by bomb or bullet or lethal injection.

Second, each of these acts of violence is seen by those performing it as entirely legitimate, a legitimate and necessary means of subduing an enemy. Breivik acted, he says, to provoke an anti-Islamist revolution. The Assad government seeks to quell the rebel opposition and keep the peace. The US government hopes to disrupt and depopulate burgeoning terrorists networks. And the state of Texas uses capital punishment as a means both of punishing serious criminal offenders and of deterring future offenses.

But there is a third commonality to these four acts of violence, beyond their claim to legitimacy and necessity. They all claim innocent victims.

Anders Breivik targeted children. He murdered young men and women whose only “guilt” was to be citizens of a tolerant nation.

The civilian deaths caused by the Syrian government cannot even be rightly called collateral damage, because uninvolved bystanders of all ages are being intentionally targeted right along with rebel forces.

It is hard to know the true extent of the lives taken by US drone attacks because they are largely unreported and carried out in remote areas, but surely, there is collateral damage, family members killed along with suspected militants. Reports have revealed that airstrikes have even targeted rescuers and people attending funerals of drone attack victims.

And one of the harsh realities of capital punishment, which advocates and detractors alike must acknowledge, is that innocent people have and will be put to death by the state. Furthermore, this most extreme form of punishment is often carried out unequally and unfairly, as in the case of Marvin Wilson, who, though guilty of his crimes, had the mental capacity of a first-grader.

So what are we to make of all this?

I don't intend to start a debate which acts of violence may be justified when and how and under what circumstances. I simply want to make the point that our culture, our world, is a violent one. Violence is common among us. Violence is almost universally recognized as an acceptable and legitimate and necessary way to deal with enemies. That is all the more true if we broaden the definition of violence to include attacks with words as well as bullets, if we include intimidation and discrimination and condescension and exclusion as well as the use of deadly force.

What are we to do with all this? What are we to do with all this, we who call ourselves Christians? We who call ourselves followers of Jesus? We who are people of the book, this book?

That's why we're here isn't it? To listen to the words of this book, to gather in the presence and spirit of Jesus, to be guided and taught and transformed, one by one, and all together, by the word and way of God? If not, why are we here?

So what we we do?

What did Paul do? He was a Christian, a follower of Jesus, a person of the book. And he lived in this same world, at a different time surely, but in a world much like ours, among human beings whose nature and ways change little from age to age or from place to place.

His world was violent too and he had firsthand experience of that violence. He encountered fierce opposition to his preaching. People rioted and beat him and stoned him. Roman officials arrested him and imprisoned him. And the story is told that he was ultimately executed, in Rome.

Paul had enemies. He was attacked, and he was aware that the people in the churches to which he wrote had already or would soon experience the same. So he told them to get ready! He told them to prepare to meet the enemy. He told them to dress for battle. He told them to put on God's armor.

And that's what we should do: put on God's armor!

But I'm telling you, God's armor doesn't look like any armor you have ever seen! A belt ... of truth. A breastplate ... of righteousness. Shoes ... with which you run to share the good news of peace. A shield ... of faith. A helmet ... of salvation.

These are our defenses -- truth and righteousness and faith and salvation and the readiness, the eagerness, to announce the gospel of peace! And our weapons? Only one, a sword. The word of God. This is the one weapon we use to keep our enemies at bay. This is the one weapon we use to pierce their defenses.

What do we do -- as Christians, as followers of Jesus, as people of the book -- in a world full of violence, in a world that finds violence acceptable and necessary? What do we do to survive? What do we do to defend ourselves? We arm ourselves with faith -- faith in God's power! We make good use of the sword of God's word. We let God's word speak to us and to our enemies of the ways human beings are intended to live, of the ways we are intended to live together. And we announce peace. We declare that God's peace is coming! We declare that God's peace is at hand!

This is how we prepare to meet the enemy. This is the armor God provides. These are the weapons God provides. Because no other armor will do. No other weapons will do. Bombs and bullets and missiles and tanks and bunkers and fences are useless, because we are not fighting against human beings.

We are not fighting against human beings! Do you hear that? As Christians, as followers of Jesus, as people of the book, we must understand that we are not fighting against human beings, and we must act accordingly.

Who is our enemy? No human being. We are not fighting against human beings. No human being is our enemy. We are fighting against the cosmic powers of this dark age.

We are fighting against the cosmic powers of this dark age! Whoa ...

Now don't tune me out! Listen carefully, because this word, this word from God, is telling us something critically important here: nothing to do with demons and dark angels and deadly battles waged in some ethereal spiritual realm, but with the things, the deep and powerful things, that confront us and challenge us and threaten us -- all of us -- the deep and powerful things that disturb and disrupt and destroy the goodness of life itself right here, right now.

How many of you have read the *Hunger Games* trilogy or have seen the movie? When Katniss entered the arena, who was her enemy? The other twenty-three children in the arena with her? No, you soon understand that even though they are trying to kill her and she must kill them in order to survive herself, they are not the enemy. She and they alike have a common enemy, something bigger than all of them, something outside the arena.

Is the enemy the people of the Capitol? The Gamemakers? President Snow? I don't want to spoil anything, but by the time you have finished the third book, it becomes rather more difficult to say just who the enemy really is ... which is also to say, that it becomes very clear just who the enemy really is!

Our enemy ... Fear ... and pride ... and envy ... and greed ... and hatred ... and vengeance ... and the thirst for power ... and the thirst for control. It is the power of these cosmic powers that we are up against, powers that invade each of us and all of us, turning us against each other and against ourselves.

Human beings are not our enemy, but the forces without face that tempt and taunt and push and pull all of us, forces that hold us and all of human history hostage, forces that persuade or provoke us to do their will, which is to destroy beauty and goodness and life itself.

That why eliminating one terrorist or removing one oppressive leader changes nothing, because we are not fighting against human beings, but against the forces that make them, make us, what we are. We may get rid of one person, but that person was not the enemy and the cosmic powers of this dark age are still among us, and to resist them, we need different weapons, we need different armor.

So put on God's armor!

“And do all this in prayer, asking for God’s help.” God is our shelter and strength. God is our defender and our savior. God is the only One who can set us free from the powers that threaten to overwhelm us. God is the One in whom our trust belongs.

*If you but trust in God to guide you, with hopeful heart through all your ways,
you will find strength, with God beside you, to bear the worst of evil days;
for those who trust God’s changeless love build on the rock that will not move!*