

Proper 5 (Series B)

“Rise! To Arms! With Prayer Employ You” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #668)

The favorite Bible story of my twin grandsons is David and Goliath, and the pages of several of their Bible story books are torn and worn wherever that story occurs. Just before their third birthday, the younger of the two announced that he wanted a rock for a birthday present. “A rock?” his mother asked. “Yes,” he said, “a rock—a stone.” Mom asked, “Why do you want a stone for your birthday?” “So I can throw it at my brother’s forehead,” he said. His middle name is David, so I guess he figured that was his role, and his older brother got to play Goliath in their game. At this point, the boys have the story down. However, their mother is considering excising the David and Goliath tale from all the Bible story anthologies in the house for now. She would like the theological point of the story to enter their brains by some means other than a literal hole in their heads.

Holy Scripture has no shortage of mayhem and violence in its pages. However, working at our worship in this 21st century culture, we justly feel constrained to avoid some of the militaristic and imperialistic language of our 19th century Christian poets. The hymns “Onward, Christian Soldiers” and “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus” have been dropped from a number of major denominational hymnals because of the implicit militarism of the text. “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains”, a mission hymn popular through the mid-20th century, has all but disappeared from the repertoire, its images too easily misunderstood to be a product of American manifest destiny and Caucasian imperialism. Many worship leaders who still have those hymns available to them think more than twice before using them in our current cultural milieu.

Such concern is certainly legitimate for the church as she gathers to sing “for the life of the world” into which the Spirit of Christ calls and sends her. But it does not diminish the intensity of the struggle with Satan, the world, and our own sinful selves that remains with us until Christ comes again. When Mark tells the story of Jesus’ temptation in the first chapter of his gospel, he never indicates that Satan left Jesus (Mark 1:12-13). In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis posits that, although Christ has won the victory over the forces of evil, the church is still in a “mopping-up operation”, doing battle with the remnants of the enemy who have not yet submitted to the glorious and gentle reign of Christ the King.

So, we need some songs for that ongoing residual struggle, and “Rise to Arms” is a fitting one. For a congregation who can handle two “big” hymns in one service, it would be provocative to sing the hymn next to “A Mighty Fortress” and let the images of both hymns dance and intertwine with each other. (Indeed, “A Mighty Fortress” is Luther’s poetic exegesis of the David and Goliath affair.) Add to those “The Strife Is O’er, the Battle Done” and you have a miniature hymn festival overflowing with Biblical images and theological reflection on the church militant.

There is plenty of Scripture to support our arming for the spiritual battle that still wages in the world, in the church, and most insidiously in our individual lives. St. Paul knew of that constant struggle, and he

calls for us to prepare for it by putting on the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6); he reminds us that if God is for us, none can be against us (Romans 8); he encourages us to stand firm, contending for the faith of the gospel (Philippians 1).

Jesus' birthday song was "peace on earth" and he began the final week of his earthly life riding on a donkey instead of a horse to show that he came in peace. But we who take up the cross and follow him are not naïve peaceniks. We understand that the powers of hell are still trying, albeit hopelessly, to undermine the kingdom of God and wrest us away from his mission. We, the church, are the front line of the resistance, C.S. Lewis's "mopper-uppers". This week's hymn is one of the songs we sing as we continue the struggle—one of the stones in our spiritual ammunition pouch (1 Samuel 17:40). It is fitting that we sing it to a tune that is nicknamed "The King of Chorales." Let us sing it with passion and conviction as we continue to follow our King Jesus, joining the army of heaven's angels, contending for the faith of the Gospel.

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Carmel, Indiana
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Rise! To arms! With prayer employ you, O Christians, lest the foe destroy you;
For Satan has designed your fall.
Wield God's word, the weapon glorious; against all foes be thus victorious.
For God protects you from them all.
Fear not the hordes of hell, here is Emmanuel. Hail the Savior!
The strong foes yield to Christ, our shield, and we, the victors, hold the field.

Cast afar this world's vain pleasure and boldly strive for heav'nly treasure.
Be steadfast in the Savior's might.
Trust the Lord, who stands beside you, for Jesus from all harm will hide you.
By faith you conquer in the fight.
Take courage, weary soul! Look forward to the goal! Joy awaits you.
The race well run, your long war won, your crown shines splendid as the sun.

Wisely fight, for time is fleeting; the hours of grace are fast retreating;
Short, short is this our earthly way.
When the Lord the dead will waken and sinners all by fear are shaken,
The saints with joy will greet that day.
Praise God, our triumph's sure. We need not long endure scorn and trial.
Our Savior King his own will bring to that great glory which we sing.

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Text: Wilhelm E. Arends (1677-1721); Translator: John M. Sloan (1835-90)

Tune: WACHET AUF ("King of Chorales"), Philip Nicolai

[This devotion has been prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and duplicated for local use.]