Onward Christian Soldiers!
Hymns of Faith Sermon Series
July 26, 2015

Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus going on before.
Christ, the royal master, leads against the foe;
Forward into battle see his banners go!

Refrain
Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus going on before.

Like a mighty army moves the Church of God;
Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod.
We are not divided, all one body we,
One in hope and doctrine, one in charity!
Refrain

Crows and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane,
But the Church of Jesus constant will remain.
Gates of hell can never ‘gainst that Church prevail;
We have Christ’s own promise, and that cannot fail.
Refrain

Onward, then, ye faithful; join the happy throng,
Blend with ours your voices in the triumph song:
Glory, laud, and honor unto Christ the King;
This through countless ages saints and angels sing
Refrain
(Christian Worship 537:1-4)

As we continue our “Hymns of Faith” sermon series, we come to a hymn that I think used to be sung more frequently than it is today—“Onward, Christian Soldiers.” I don’t know why it would be sung less frequently today than in generations past, but I have some guesses.

Look at the opening line: “Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war.” I mean, isn’t that laying it on a bit thick? I understand that the hymnwriter wanted to get us excited about and committed to our faith, but “soldiers”? And “war”? Isn’t that a bit overblown, a bit overdramatic? And really, isn’t this sort of terminology maybe even somewhat inappropriate at a time when many of our fellow citizens are in an actual war?

It’s not inappropriate, for the Bible uses such terminology to describe what has been going on in the world from the time that Satan hissed his words into Eve’s ear until now. It’s certainly not overdramatic, for the losers of this war will not only lose their freedom, they will also lose their lives forever in Hell—and it doesn’t get any more dramatic than that.
The two sides in this war are pretty clear—God and Satan. (There’s a reason that he was given that name—Satan—for it means “adversary”, or “enemy.”)

And no one gets to play Switzerland in this war. No one gets to be neutral. No one gets to be an independent entity. Either one serves that great general known as God, or one serves that cunning commander known as Satan.

Of course the Devil doesn’t quite pitch it that way. He tells us how great it will be to choose freedom, to do our own thing and answer to no one. That’s what he told Eve. That’s what he tells us.

Eve fell for it. We fall for it. And then the awful truth becomes clear: This is a war to the death, and we’ve become captives of the Devil, doomed to death and Hell. And there will be no switching of sides, for we no longer meet the entrance standards for God’s army. Our spiritual vision is terrible, and we’re full of the disease of sin. We can feel the gates of Hell swinging slowly shut, soon to imprison us forever.

So what did God do? He declared war, and he attacked. His manner of attack was a bit unusual, of course. He sent only one soldier—his Son, Jesus Christ—and the weapon with which he attacked was...a cross.

After a life of being the perfect soldier, a life of perfect submission and obedience to the will of his general, God the Father—that’s what a good soldier does—obeys those placed above him—and Jesus certainly showed that attitude with his words “I have come to do your will” (Hebrews 10:9)—after a life as the perfect soldier, Jesus was nailed to a cross, and there he suffered the punishment of God for our sins. After his death, he defeated death when he rose from the dead. He even stormed the gates of Hell afterwards, descending into Hell to proclaim his victory. (1 Peter 3:18-20)

Yes, with the weapon of the cross Jesus had won the battle. Therefore Paul says, “having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).

As a result, we were now free to leave the clutches of the Devil. But we were like prisoners of war who are unaware that we have been freed—or unwilling to believe such good news. So Jesus sent his Holy Spirit to storm in and free us.

That Holy Spirit also used an unusual weapon. He used the message of the cross of Christ—a message found in God’s Word—and he used that weapon to shake us awake spiritually and to free us from the way of thinking that had left us shackled to Satan.

Now that we are believers in Jesus, we are in his army. Yes, his army. You see, the battle isn’t over. It’s not over because the Devil continues to attempt to lure us over to his side.

Therefore we are “Christian soldiers, marching as to war.” This is the war Paul talked about when he wrote, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil” (Ephesians 6:12).

How do we fight this war? Understand that the battle will not be easy. It will at times be unpleasant and even painful. Paul wrote to Timothy, “You then, my son...endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” (2 Timothy 2:1,3)

Not only the devil but also the unbelieving world will be hostile to the members of God’s army. We need to be aware of that and ready for it, rather than thinking that we can sit on the sidelines or fly under the radar. We’re at war, and choosing not to participate will get you killed!
So, given the fearsome nature of our enemy and given the fact that he’s trying to recapture our souls, defensiveness/protecting ourselves might seem to be a wise course of action.

One might argue that there is something to be said for that idea. After all, when Paul tells us to “put on the full armor of God” he speaks of some clothing that is defensive, such as the “shield of faith” which is to be used to “extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one.” (Cf. Ephesians 6:13-16)

(We do note that the “shield of faith” refers to a faith that has Christ and his cross as its focus—and we understand why the hymnwriter spoke of Christian soldiers having the “cross of Christ going on before.”)

And yet you’ll notice that the words of the hymn don’t speak primarily of an army that is on the defensive, an army in fearful retreat, an army dug into its trenches. It speaks of the army of Christ marching—and doing so “forward into battle.”

There are good reasons for that. One reason is that we have a weapon with which we can attack Satan and actually force him to retreat—the sword of the Spirit to which Paul refers in Ephesians 6—that is, the mighty Word of God. Armed with that, we can actually attack the Devil, continually weakening him as the Word of God builds us up and makes us even stronger.

The second reason why the army of Christ marches forward, marches aggressively into battle is because there are still many who are held captive by Satan, and they need to be rescued.

The weapon we use is, of course, the same weapon with which the Holy Spirit rescued us from Hell—the Word of God. And so “like a mighty army moves the church of God”, swinging that sword of the Spirit all over the world.

Of course, we don’t always feel like a mighty army. We feel like a fairly small group. The people who make up Peace Lutheran Church can hardly be considered a mighty army, right? Well, actually we could—especially when you consider that there weren’t very many in Christ’s army when he ascended into heaven—and look what those soldiers accomplished! You and I are just two examples of what they accomplished. So when we have “Christ, the royal master, leading us against the foe”, we at Peace form a pretty powerful group of soldiers.

Then, keep this in mind, too. Peace Lutheran Church is just one regiment in God’s army. That “mighty army” is made up of all who are “one in hope and doctrine”—or as God says in Ephesians, his army is made up of all those around the whole world who have “one Spirit...one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” (Ephesians 4:4-6)

That army has a whole lot of people—nearly 400,000 in the Wisconsin Synod alone. An army of 400,000 would, I think, be reasonably formidable on the world scene today—and this army—which has far more than 400,000, by the way—is equipped with that terrifically powerful weapon of which we’ve spoken so often already today. Paul contrasts our weapons with the puny weapons used by the armies of the nations when he says, “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)
You know what weapon demolishes “pretensions that set themselves up against the knowledge of God.” When we preach God’s law, the pretenses and the pride of sinful man are destroyed as he is humbled by the realization that he is a sinner.

And then we bring out the really big guns. We bring out what Paul called the *dunamis* of the Gospel (Romans 1:16). That’s the Greek word from which we get our word “dynamite.” Just as dynamite changes the entire landscape, so does the Gospel, blowing the Devil and his work to bits.

Does the army of God have a backup plan? It has no backup plan because it needs no backup plan. There is no force more powerful than that of the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel in Word and Sacraments.

Jesus said as much when he said in response to Peter’s confession that Jesus was the Savior, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18)

There’s something interesting about that statement that I didn’t see for years and years. Perhaps you didn’t, either. If so, perhaps it says that we sometimes think a bit more defensively and fearfully than Christian soldiers ought.

It speaks of the gates of Hades not overcoming it. Who’s on the defensive there? If the location of the battle is the gates of Hades, I’d say that Hell and Satan are on the defensive, and that Christ and his mighty army on the offensive, taking the battering ram of the Gospel to the trembling gates of Hell.

I can tell you how that’s going to turn out, because I know what happened the last time Christ attacked the gates of Hell. After his resurrection from the dead, he headed down to Hell and kicked those doors wide open, striding into Hell to proclaim his victory over the death and the Devil. Then he marched out, leaving them hanging limply from one hinge.

Satan had no answer for that on Easter Sunday, and he has no answer for the Gospel today.

Neither has any of the lesser powers—powers that Paul described as “flesh and blood.” (Eph 6:12) The flesh and blood Jewish leaders tried to destroy the Church with a persecution that flared up especially around the time of the stoning of Stephen. The members of that church, the soldiers of that army were “scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1), but they took their weapon with them, and they “preached the word wherever they went.” (Acts 8:4) Those Jewish leaders are long gone, while the Church they tried to kill has moved far, far beyond Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria.

The Roman government tried to destroy the Church. The Roman Empire waned and eventually perished. The Church grew and flourished.

Communist governments tried to squash Christianity. Most of those communist regimes have disappeared, but Christianity did not—and in fact it grew even during those regimes.

The Church has its enemies today—many enemies, in fact. None of them will win. None of them will last. But Christ’s church will. Yes,

*Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane,*

*But the Church of Jesus constant will remain.*

*Gates of hell can never ‘gainst that Church prevail;*+

*We have Christ’s own promise, and that cannot fail.*
So we march as to war, but we march confidently, singing what the hymnwriter refers to as “the triumph-song.” That sounds both silly and presumptuous—marching into a battle singing a song of triumph for that battle—even though it hasn’t been completed yet.

And yet that’s just what the Israelites did in 2 Chronicles 20. After being told that a vast army was coming against him, Jehoshaphat “resolved to inquire of the Lord” (2 Chronicles 20:3). God gave his response through a man named Jahaziel, who told them that God would deliver them the next day. Then we read, “Early in the morning they left for the Desert of Tekoa. As they set out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, ‘Listen to me, Judah and people of Jerusalem! Have faith in the Lord your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful.’ After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying:

‘Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever.’” (2 Chronicles 20:20-21)

They were able to sing because they knew that with God leading them, they could not be defeated. Neither can we be defeated while being led by “Christ, the royal Master”, who “leads against the foe.”

So the last verse of the hymn says that we should start the singing:

*Onward, then, ye faithful; join the happy throng.*
*Blend with ours your voices in the triumph song:*
*Glory, laud, and honor unto Christ the King;*
*This through countless ages saints and angels sing.*

If some of those words of praise sound familiar, they should—because they are the words that the “saints and angels sing” in Revelation: “Worthy is the lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!...To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Revelation 5:12,13)

So, Christian soldiers, understand this. You are at war, and the enemy is fearsome. But arm yourself with the Word of God, focus on the banner of the cross of Christ, and you can march boldly into battle, singing with the certainty that comes from knowing that not even the gates of Hell can overcome those who are led by Christ. Amen.