

## Going Into Battle – Maci Sepp

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

[Due to a weather cancellation, this sermon was prepared for January 15, 2017, but not preached at St. Paul's.]

When I was only eight years old, I joined my local park district soccer team, as I'm sure many of you did (or convinced your children to do). Besides the trimmed green grass and calm spring breeze, I remember there being two very distinct groups of children: the ones who were outgoing and proud to display their dozens of bruises, and the ones who ran the other direction, crying at the thought of getting kicked in the shins. If you know me at all, you can probably guess which category I fell into. It's not that I, or the other squeamish kids, didn't care. We were simply afraid. We were afraid of the possibility of getting hurt, the power of our enemies, and the unknown. Plus, if someone else on the team was taking risks and scoring goals, who really cared what we did? We still showed up to practice every day and participated in team get-togethers. All of us were thrilled and grateful to be on the same team, but not everyone gave it their all. Unfortunately, this mindset didn't disappear once I quit the soccer team the following spring. I was still afraid. Except now, I was afraid of new ways of getting hurt, new enemies, and an entirely new and greater unknown. I think many of us are stuck in this position of being on the same team, while still being afraid to give God our all. This, of course, isn't because we don't want to give God our all. Most of the time, we love being Christians, especially ones who sing hymns, give weekly offerings, and enjoy community potlucks. But at a time when people are crying Armageddon, it's difficult to see how we can maneuver ourselves around the chaos or where we can bring positive change outside of our own church.

But fear not! Today, our scripture readings tell us why we should not be afraid. In our reading from Isaiah, we read of the Servant's song to the world. This isn't just a song to the Servant's closest friends or to Israel, but one to the coastlands and to the peoples from far away and to those at the end of the earth. We are told that we are all carefully molded and meticulously designed before we are even born. It is here that the Servant draws upon some interesting imagery. I'm not sure about the rest of you, but sharp swords and arrows aren't usually the first things that come to mind when I think of God's creation of us. So maybe we just brush this off as an allusion to the war and destruction that occurred all over Israel at the time this song was first written. But this phrasing speaks to us in the now as well. It is as if in creating us, God is preparing us for battle. But this is no ordinary battle. This is one that we will fight against the devil for our entire lives. God has chosen us to be His servants—members of His team—for combating evil and defending the Kingdom. We may not really know exactly what we're up against, but we are told that fulfilling this destiny of servanthood will bring glory to God. Not only are we to raise up tribes and restore the survivors, but with God's words and God's strength, we become beacons of light to all nations.

The light of God that shines within us is the most powerful weapon in our arsenal. But nothing comes of it if we choose to keep this light—this gift—to ourselves. It is not meant to be contained. What kind of Christians are we if we aren't sharing God? What kind of Christians are we if we are complacent? The spread of the Christian faith does not come from withholding God from our neighbors or making routine our priority.

We see this sort of fearlessness in Paul through his letter to the church of Corinth. He is not afraid to speak truth and seek justice within the Corinthian congregations. Paul is direct and chooses to go straight into battle. But his approach is not vicious or hostile. In the introduction of his letter, we see Paul giving thanks and uniting himself with the church despite their struggles. He reminds the church of their calling and spiritual gifts from God. Paul doesn't say these things lightly or because he's letting Corinth off the hook. He says these things because they are what he believes to be true. Paul exhibits the same gracious and magnificent love that he has experienced in his relationship with Christ. It seems an unlikely way to approach battle. And yet, that is what makes it admirable.

So maybe you've done a really great job at being the courageous warrior—the assertive team member—the “Paul.” That's fantastic, and I applaud you for doing what I fail at almost every day. But for those of you who, like me, are often afraid, the Psalms assure us that it's okay. Even when we are afraid and find ourselves in the desolate pit by our own misdirection, God remains with us. Not only that, but God also lifts us from the pit, pulling us from the shadows of doubt and fear and into His light. With this light, God saved us, and He continues to save us all. He lifts us up and places us upon a rock, making our steps secure. This rock does not only serve as a state of security but this rock also appears in the form of people who bring us security. Our rock of people consists of our teammates—our fellow believers. Just as they support us, we support them because of our shared trust in God.

Once we make our way out of the pit and onto the sturdy rock, we are able to speak of God's faithfulness and salvation. If we don't speak of his faithfulness, and hide his salvation from others, we just end up back in the pit. God's saving help is what protects us in battle, whether we're fighting for social justice on our campus or going head-to-head with our nation's most seemingly disaffected politicians. These are by no means easy battles, nor ones that we necessarily will survive. Whether or not we choose to participate in these battles, we will ultimately perish because our fight is not for our sole benefit in the life we have on earth. It is for the hope of a Kingdom that is diverse and unified and holy. Perhaps, one day, we will live eternally in such a place.

We find these themes of hope and trust reiterated in our gospel reading. John the Baptist stands as another exceptional example of a steady beacon of God's light. In the first few verses, we read about John exclaiming that he has witnessed the Lamb of God. It is his hope that others will hear and listen. John admits that prior to baptizing Jesus, he had no idea that he had met the Son of God until the moment he saw the Spirit descending from heaven. His bewilderment speaks to his pure and noble motives for following God. It is here that John experienced the most remarkable revelation of his life. This realization and what is to follow is something special. It is the Epiphany. It demonstrates how witness and referral lead us to Christ. It stands as another way for God to reveal and remind us of His character.

Lucky for us, John doesn't keep this to himself. John is eager to spread the word of Jesus' coming and quick to rejoice with his own disciples. He doesn't play it safe, and he hits his disciples with everything he's got. John is kind of the poster child for witnessing about Jesus. He is honest, enthusiastic, and unafraid. And as a result, John's disciples choose to follow Jesus, and they hardly even know who He is. They get personal with Jesus. They engage with him. They

encounter him. All Jesus has to say are three simple and compelling words of invitation: *Come and see*. And when Jesus says this, we do.

By accepting this invitation, we have the freedom to choose God, but not the battles that we face in this world. Even if we have no say in what hardships exist, God will still call on us. He calls each of us to be a part of different causes and movements and missions and dreams that are well-worth fighting for. So when we hear God's call, we get to decide whether or not we take Him up on His offer. We have free will to fight alongside our brothers and sisters for what we believe is right and will glorify God. This may sound crazy, but we are also given free will to go into these battles armed with hope and joy. Fighting for the kingdom is not meant to be violent or cruel. It is also not meant to be a burden. Rather, it is a privilege and an honor to fight for the persecuted and the marginalized so that we may one day glorify God.

At this point in history, we may believe that we no longer hold any power or influence. But we do, because we are peaceful warriors who have been chosen by God. So may our focus in the days ahead be a time of deep thought. May it be a time of celebration for the strides made by Martin Luther King, Jr. and African Americans—a time for preparation for the strides in social justice that have yet to be made—a time for reflection on the last eight years under our nation's current leadership—a time of consideration for the power that is to come. But most importantly, may it be a time for remembering that we are God's people first, not U.S. citizens, not our job descriptions, not even our families. We are first and foremost His humbled and cherished people. Even so, we are by no means perfect warriors. Our light does not constantly shine at its brightest. We are not Jesus. But we can still be the Pauls and Johns of the world. We can still be the proud soccer player. We can still be unafraid. And if God is the One guiding us in our battles, and we are following Him with trust and hope, how could we ever lose?