

## **The Image of the Invisible God: Warrior**

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 10:1-3, 17-20

When I imagine what it would have been like for the 72 as they went out two by two on their Jesus mission, I think of my first summer assignment. When you go to seminary you don't just do classroom learning, you also have field education where you gain practical, hands-on experience. Part of that Field Education includes summer assignments where naïve young seminarians are sent out to serve a church for a summer. Sometimes those churches are vacant.

That was true of the church I was sent to in Western Ontario. It was a church that had been without a pastor for some time and so they got me. I was 25 years old, I was very green, and suddenly I was the pastor to these people. Within the first week I had a conversation with a man whose adult son was lost in addictive behavior, the man had tried everything. 'Pastor, what do I do?' I wasn't sure. In the second week I sat down to coffee with a man who had been in the Dutch resistance. He was haunted by the fact that in his resistance work he had killed Germans. The moral weight of what he'd done plagued his soul. On top of that, twice every Sunday I got up in front of a room full of beautiful, struggling people who expected 25-year-old me to speak words of hope into their fear and uncertainty. "Go! I am sending you out as lambs among wolves." That sounds about right.

Of course things would have been much harder and much scarier for the 72 disciples Jesus sent on their mission. I went to an existing church with structures and support. They had an apartment for me. I had a rental car. The 72 had no support structures. There were no congregations waiting for them, and they had no place to lay their head. Two by two, they go out in Jesus' name to announce the kingdom of God, to confront evil, to tell the people about Jesus. Terrifying. "Go, I am sending you out like lambs among wolves." That sounds about right.

Maybe that sounds about right for you too. Because life is hard. You might have many more creature comforts than the 72, many more creature comforts, but in your own way every day you ride out to confront evil and fear. Every day you go out and try to meet these things with hope and love and wisdom and prayer and Jesus. That's what we're doing, right? Our situation may be different than the 72, but the call is the same and the enemy is the same and the fears are real. "Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves." That sounds about right.

So. How did the mission of the 72 go? Let's turn to verse 17 and hear the report of the disciples when they get back from their mission.

So that's quite a missions report! Jesus may have sent them out like lambs among wolves, but they are returning like Champions. They can't believe how well the mission went. They confronted evil, they proclaimed the kingdom, they healed diseases; "Lord even the demons submitted to us in your name!" They are full of joy. Jesus seems pretty excited too. "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven! I have given you power to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy!"

Notice how Jesus sees the disciple's mission as a spiritual engagement, a battle, with Satan, with the devil, with the powers of evil, with demons. To put it in terms of Ephesians 6 which Kristy read earlier, Jesus sees their mission as a battle against 'the Spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.' "Even the demons gave way before us!" the disciples exclaim, and Jesus says, "Way to go guys, what you did out there sent Satan reeling!"

Now maybe this is where the mission of the 72 seems to disconnect from your life and your mission. How many of you have performed an exorcism? How many of you have cast out a demon? Me neither. So maybe you think, "Well, they were casting out demons so obviously they were engaging in a battle with

spiritual forces in the heavenly realms, but I'm just dealing with regular life problems. So my life and mission is different than theirs."

I think you're wrong about that. All your life's struggles are against the forces of evil in the heavenly realms. If you are fighting cancer or if you are walking beside someone who is fighting cancer, you are in a spiritual battle. Now wait a minute, you might say, cancer is a physical problem, surely! It's caused by the malignant growth of malformed cells in the human body. It's nothing like demon possession! Yes, and no. It's certainly true that cancer is a physical disease and you need to fight it with physical treatments and physical medicines, but it is also spiritual. Ask any cancer patient and they will tell you that the fight is in their body and in their spirit. Can I stay hopeful and positive in the middle of this disease, or will I sink into fear and despair? Will this disease cause me to collapse into concern about myself and my needs, or will I be able to stay generous and compassionate towards others? Cancer is absolutely spiritual.

Every human task, every human struggle is both physical and spiritual. Are you going to buy some new clothes? It's not just a physical purchase. It's not just about keeping your body covered and warm; there's a spiritual dimension. Will your clothes be flashy or conventional? Will they give off a preppy vibe, a hipster vibe, a serious vibe, a playful vibe? Will they be modest, suggestive, something in between? When you are clothes shopping you are in the spiritual realm. Honestly it's hard to come up with any conscious human decision that doesn't have a spiritual dimension to it. And whenever there is a spiritual dimension to a decision you are engaged with the power of the evil one. Yes, that struggle can look very different. Sometimes it looks like Jesus casting out a demon; sometimes it looks like you buying a shirt, but it's all part of the same struggle. You are constantly engaged against the forces of evil in the Spiritual realm.

This struggle in all its forms is central to Jesus' mission in the gospels. Jesus sees his mission on earth as an engagement with the powers of evil. He is here to defeat the devil. Before he starts his ministry, who does Jesus meet with in the wilderness? He meets the devil. He defeats the devil's temptation. In Mark, his first reported act of his public ministry is to cast a demon out of a man who confronts him in a worship service. The demon says "I know who you are, Jesus of Nazareth! Have you come to destroy us!?" The demons see what's going on. Jesus is a warrior and he'd come to destroy them. Jesus casts out multiple demons in the gospel of Luke. Jesus repeatedly teaches on the activity of the devil and our need to resist him. There are at least a dozen times in Luke where Jesus confronts the devil or warns us about the forces of evil in the heavenly realm. Jesus is here to fight a war.

What attribute of God does this side of Jesus reveal? What attribute of God is reflected and revealed by Jesus the demon fighter? It's actually more than just an attribute of God that's revealed through this behavior of Jesus, it's one of God's names. Which brings us to the Bible quiz portion of today's sermon. You probably know that when your pew Bible uses the word LORD in all caps, the Hebrew word behind it is Yahweh. If you see all caps LORD, you know that it's translating the Hebrew word 'Yahweh.' Many of you knew that.

Here's a harder question. If your pew Bible has the word LORD in all caps followed by the word Almighty and the A in almighty is capitalized, that refers to a different one of God's names. Do you know which one? It appears more than 200 times in the Old Testament. Yahweh Sabaoth. The Lord Sabaoth. Does that name sound familiar? It should, we sang it in our opening hymn: "Lord Sabaoth his name. From age to age the same, and he must win the battle." The NIV translates this the Lord Almighty, but what it literally means is the Lord of Hosts. It's a name that's meant to paint a picture. You are meant to see the living God in his heavenly throne room surrounded by a great angel host. When you say the Lord of Hosts, you are meant to see God in the heavenly throne room surrounded by the angel armies, a great host ready to ride out against the powers of evil. It's a warrior image.

In Jesus, Lord Sabaoth has come to walk among us in the flesh. He has come to fight for us. He has come to fight with us. He has come to go toe to toe with the devil. He has come to break the devil's power, and through his death and resurrection Satan will fall like lightning from heaven. Lord Sabaoth his name, from age to age the same and he has already won the battle.

Of course the point of this passage is not simply to say that the power of Lord Sabaoth is in Jesus, the point is to say that in Jesus and through Jesus that power is in us too! When we go out on our mission when we face our spiritual struggles and our spiritual choices and our Spiritual battles, the power of Lord Sabaoth, the power of the Lord of the angel armies, is in us. "I have given you power to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy! Nothing will harm you!" says Jesus. When you say, as I did earlier in the sermon, that all our choices have a spiritual dimension and so all our choices involve an engagement with the forces of evil in the heavenly realms, that can sound intimidating. Especially when the evil seems so strong and so present. But Jesus is saying, "Don't be afraid. You are stronger than you know. There is more power in you than you know. Your acts of kindness and prayer and love and truth-telling and generosity, they are so strong. When you act out of my power you send the devil reeling."

Let me close by saying 3 things about the way this power works in us. First, I know that when Jesus says: 'You will be able to overcome all power of the enemy and nothing will harm you,' you probably think, wait a minute: harm comes to good Christian people all the time! Christians get cancer and they get persecuted and they suffer from depression; how can Jesus say 'nothing will harm you'? Remember: Jesus is speaking about the spiritual realm in this passage. In this earthly life all kinds of bad things can happen to us. 'In this world you will have trouble,' says Jesus. But there is a deep part of you where Jesus has a hold of you. In the deepest most central part of who you are Jesus has a hold and there is nothing in all creation that can harm that part of you. I can't define that part of you or point to it, but Jesus holds that part, and nothing can touch it. You could lose your mind, your body could fall to pieces but that part of you belongs to the angel armies and out of it he will make a new creation.

Second, remember the mode of the fight. I know I say this all the time, but I will keep saying it because Christians keep getting it wrong. Yes, the Lord of the Angel armies is more powerful than the evil. Yes, He has triumphed over the powers of evil and won the victory, but remember how he did it. He didn't do it by clobbering people; he did it by dying on a cross. When Jesus says you shall trample on snakes and scorpions, it's easy to think, let's go out there and trample on some bad guys! But remember how Jesus tread his enemies under foot, by dying on a cross. Through sacrifice. Through love. When you imagine gaining victory over the forces of evil in the heavenly realms, think less of fists and firearms; think more of the fruit of the Spirit. That's what Jesus is getting at when he says, "Don't rejoice in your power over evil, rejoice that your name is written in heaven." It's not about your power, it's about God's grace.

Finally, most of the time, the victory won't look the way you expect it to look. Most of the time it will not look like 3000 people converting to Christ after Peter's sermon on Pentecost. Or like the demon coming out of a man with a cry after Jesus rebukes it. Most of our victories will be small and unnoticed. The recovering alcoholic resists the urge to drink for one more day. The caregiver helps her ailing husband in the bathroom one more day; shows patience and kindness and even joy. The tired Dad takes time to go out with his son, not just to play golf, but to check in with him and ask him, "how are things with your spirit?"

Or maybe this. At our foot spa, the nurses are the ones who engage with our neighbors and bless them with basic foot care. They wash their feet and give some basic medical care. Those nurses are supported by a bucket brigade. The job of the bucket brigade is to pick up the dirty foot care water and replace it with a tub of clean water. They spend an hour standing by the slop sink in the janitor's closet filling tubs and delivering them to the nurses.

It's not glamorous work. It's a long way from an exorcism. It lacks the majesty of a mass conversion. But I promise you when they deliver their tubs of clean water, the demons give way and Satan falls like lightning from heaven.

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