

THE WORSHIPING ARMY OF GOD

Each Lord's Day as we enter into communion we offer up praise to God as we say, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts (or 'armies')." This is a good, biblical expression of praise used in the church from its earliest days. But who are these hosts/armies? Well, they certainly refer to the angelic armies surrounding God, creating the cloud that is around him in Scripture. But these armies are also the people of God: us. Understanding this is important to understanding what is going on when we worship God here on the Lord's Day. We worship as the army of God. In telling us much about who we are as worshipers, understanding ourselves as a worshiping army also tells us much about how we are to approach worship. *The people of God as an army are called into God's presence to be inspected, given marching orders, invigorated, and sent out in order to take dominion over the world bringing it to its intended rest.*

As I mentioned, the nature of worship as in the context of being an army tells us much about what we are doing in this particular service in which God is renewing his covenant with us. Because liturgical worship brings with it its own set of dangers, I want address what I see as potential dangers from the angle of the nature of worship being militaristic. I am concerned about how worship is approached in terms of lethargy, ho-hum, hum-drum-ness. I realize that there are or could be many contributing factors. Liturgical worship might not be as new and fresh as it once was. People may simply be tired from all of the activities of the week. There may be distractions. My purpose here is to keep us focused and encourage us to press forward by reminding us of who we are and what we are called to do.

The first thing that needs to be done is to understand that the Bible teaches that God's people are, in fact, an army; his army.

THE PEOPLE OF GOD AS THE ARMY OF GOD

In the book of Exodus it is said explicitly that God's people are his armies or his hosts. They are said to be such first within the context of the original Passover and Exodus. We read, for example, in Ex 12.41, "And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years -- on that very same day -- it came to pass that ***all the armies of YHWH*** went out from the land of Egypt." Then again in v. 51, "And it came to pass, on that very same day, that YHWH brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt according to their ***armies.***" The command that God gave to Moses and Aaron in Ex 6.26 also says the people of God are to be brought up out of Egypt according to their armies. This language is used of God's people at this time also in Ex 7.4 and then again in 12.17.

After the children of Israel are brought up out of Egypt and come to Sinai, it is there that they are mustered as an army. This is what the opening chapters of Numbers is about. What is happening at the beginning of Numbers is happening at the same time as the events at the end of Exodus and the building of the Tabernacle. Num 1.1 makes it clear that they are still at Sinai. In Num 1.3 we read that Moses and Aaron are to number the people from 20 years old and upward by their armies. God is mustering his army.

This understanding of the people of God as an army does not come out of the blue. This is something that God has expected of his people from the beginning. When God created man, Adam, he created him for the purpose of taking dominion over the whole earth. Adam would do this and, in the image of his dominion-taking heavenly Father, he would bring the creation to its rest. This dominion-taking is a form of war. Without the presence of sin this war would have been of a different nature and less difficult, but it would have been war-like nevertheless. We get

that image from the fact that one of Adam's duties with regard to the Garden was that he was to guard it as well as tend it (Gen 2.15). That meant that there would be threats to the garden which Adam was called to repel. This is a pre-fall phenomenon. Before Adam, outside of the Garden, lay an unformed and unfilled world. His responsibility was to form it and fill it. Even without the presence of sin, Adam would have to work and wrestle with things in order to take dominion over them. The reason for this is that he is created as the image of God. We learn from the song of Moses in Ex 15 that YHWH is a man/husband of war (15.3). If he is a warrior then we must be warriors.

With the entrance of sin through Adam's disobedience in failing to be a proper warrior in dealing with the serpent, the battle intensifies and adds new dimensions. The serpent must still be overcome—and he will be overcome—by the Warrior Bride and the Warrior Seed (Gen 3.15). The land must now be fought with greater intensity also in order to make it fruitful. It will be by the arduous sweat of the brow that thorns and thistles will be done away with and fruit will be borne. But this is an intensification and a new battlefield. It does not mark the beginning of man being a warrior. Thus, the people of God were always meant to be God's army. The language of Exodus and Numbers, therefore, while suddenly popping up in the text, is nothing new.

THE PEOPLE OF GOD AS THE WORSHIPING ARMY

The people of God as an army is well-established in the earliest parts of the Bible and is presupposed all the way through Revelation. But what is also presupposed is that worship is fundamental to the nature of this army, not an added dimension. Man is created in order to take dominion of the earth. This is something that is clear on the face of the text in Gen 1.26-28. But that dominion was always to be understood within the context of man as a worshiper. To put this in military terms, man owes his allegiance to this one Commander, and he is to show that allegiance through acts of homage. Worship is not something that God "tacked on" to man's "essence," or something like that. Man is created as *homo adorans*, worshiping man. (Man is not first and foremost *homo sapiens*, wise/knowing man. Man as worshiper is more fundamental we might say.) Man is created and defined by God. He is told who he is and what he is to do. Man owes his allegiance to God. This allegiance (what we might also call *faith*) was something that was to be exercised in tangible ways in the Garden of Eden. Man will find life in the midst of the Garden at the Tree of Life, a tree from which he was invited to eat. Eventually, man will be promoted in the midst of the Garden at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. After he is obedient and proves himself to be faithful in the tasks given him, God will give him greater rule in the world.

The importance of this is the fact that this all happens in the Garden on the mountain of God. The mountain of God was the place of worship. Thus, it was the place where man receives life from God and exaltation from God. Mountains are places where worship takes place. The Garden was on a mountain as is seen from its landscape in Gen 2 as well as it being explicitly stated in Ezek 28.14-16. We will see this at Sinai, Mt. Zion, and eventually on a mountain in Galilee (Mt 28).

So, warrior man's fundamental context for life was found in being a worshiper. This defined the fact that he was a warrior *and* how the warfare was to take place. This brings us back to the purpose of the Exodus, the time when God delivered his armies out of Egypt. What is the reason that God gives as to why his people need to leave Egypt? We find that purpose in one of our readings: Ex 4.23: "So I say to you, let My son go that ***he may serve Me***. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn." What is this service of which YHWH

speaks? It is, fundamentally, worship. That is made clear in a couple of places. In Exod 3.12 YHWH promises Moses that he will deliver his people. The sign will be that they will return to the mountain on which YHWH has appeared to Moses, Horeb or Sinai, and worship there. Also, when appearing before Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron tell Pharaoh that the people are to be released to hold a feast to YHWH in the wilderness (5.1-3). At this feast they would offer sacrifices. This was nothing less than worship. This is how Moses presented it to the elders of Israel as well in Exod 3.18. After a number of intervening incidents (how's that for understatement!), God delivers his *armies*. Why is he delivering his armies? In order that they might worship him.

When God brings his people to Mt. Sinai, he does so in order to make a covenant with them. He calls them into this with the sound of the trumpets (Ex 19.13, 16, 19). This is the great worship service. There God forms his people into a new people through the making of the covenant with them. Then he provides them the means by which this covenant will be maintained and renewed when he gives them prescriptions for the Tabernacle and for the service of it in Exodus and Leviticus. The Tabernacle will be a portable holy mountain. It is the place where Sinai is found according to Ps 68.17 ("Sinai is now in the Holy Place."). As God forms his people at Sinai, he is shaping up those armies he has delivered. He is forming up an army that will be called to take the land that was promised to Abraham. He is forming a worshiping army. At Sinai, God arranges his armies.

Keeping in mind that Exodus 19 through the first few verses of Numbers 10 occur in the same time frame at Mt. Sinai, we begin to see how God arranges his armies. First, there is the high priest. God gives him armor; a helmet, a breastplate, a sword, etc. The high priest is a warrior. We see this description more fully in places like Isa 59.17 where YHWH himself is depicted in similar clothing: "For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, And a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, And was clad with zeal as a cloak." In Eph 6 where we are told to put on the whole armor of God, this mostly reflects the high priest's garments. In Rev 1 where we see Jesus clothed as the high priest, he is actually dressed for war as is seen throughout the remainder of Revelation. The high priest is a holy warrior, leading the people into warfare. The priests were warriors; something carried out quite literally in Josh 6 at the battle of Jericho.

Second, there is the arrangement of the whole of the people of God. Numbers 1-10 focuses on this arrangement. Numbers 2.3 and the corresponding commands for each of the tribes makes it clear that God is arranging his *armies*, each with his own standard. The priests and the Levites were the closest to the Tabernacle in order to guard the holiness of God. But each of the tribes was arranged according to their armies around the Tabernacle, the mountain of God. The Tabernacle is central to the army of God, because worship is meant to order and prepare the army for the warfare their God intends. Worship certainly prepares the people for battle, but there is also the realization that worship itself is also a battle (one of the reasons why it is so difficult at times). The prime example of this is the initial and subsequent Passovers. Passover is a worship feast. But what happens at Passover? In Passover the people of God are delivered and the enemy is defeated. Worship *is* warfare!

At Sinai God initially gathered his armies around his holy mountain by calling them into his presence with the trumpets from his cloud. Subsequently, God's armies to his holy mountain by trumpets as well. In Num 10 God prescribed the making and use of the two silver trumpets. These would image the trumpets of the angelic host at Sinai. The priests were to blow them. These trumpets had a couple of functions. Generally, they were used to gather the people and to break camp. Different sounds of the trumpets told the people what was happening. When both trumpets were blown, all of the congregation were to gather at the Tabernacle/Tent of Meeting.

If the trumpet was blown only once, then only the leaders were to come. There were tunes of alarm and calls to battle. There was a sound that would tell the people how to break camp. God says that these trumpets are memorials before him (10.9). That is, he will hear them and come and defeat their enemies. God himself is called to the battle with his people as it were.

All of this to say that the people of God were arranged and fundamentally understood as a worshiping army. The call to gather at the Tabernacle had a fundamental connection with their call to war. Provisions were made at Sinai also for the continuation of the army. Three times a year all the males were to appear before YHWH at particular Feasts; Passover, Weeks, Booths. These males were those who were 20 years old and older. Each year, three times a year, YHWH mustered his army to appear before him. Those three times per year were, especially, the time when he would inspect and reinvigorate his troops for battle.

All of this does provide a larger context for the gospel of Matthew, for example. Jesus is the new Moses and the new Israel. He passes through the water, battles the serpent in the wilderness (like the children of Israel before they reach Sinai; Ex 17), and then ascends mountain to give God's new, fulfilled law and form up his armies. Things are definitely changing in some of the methods of warfare, but the basics are still the same. From this mountain Jesus will lead his people in the conquest of the land beginning in Mt. 8 and will end with all authority in heaven and on earth being given to him. Jesus and his people remain holy warriors. And he is telling them the way that this warfare will be conducted.

All of this comes down to this question: what does all of this mean for our worship on the Lord's Day in Covenant Renewal or the Lord's Service? Much in every way. Each Lord's Day our God is mustering his army to the Feast. He comes to inspect us, rearrange us, invigorate us, and send us out to take the dominion to which he has called us in order to bring the world to its intended rest. This shapes the way that we worship. This time is a particular time set aside for a particular purpose where some things are appropriate and some things are not appropriate. It doesn't mean that the things that are not appropriate for this time are necessarily sinful. It means that they don't fit this context.

Covenant Renewal should have a particular *tone*, in other words. It is distinct from what you do privately. It is distinct from concerts, play times, etc. The sights, sounds, and rituals that God instituted in the OC reminded his armies of what they were doing. They were specified because they had purpose and meaning.

This is the time when the Commander of YHWH's armies comes to inspect the troops, shape them up, and send them out; just as he did when he met Joshua in Josh 5. When the Commander shows up—and he does show up—there should be *respect*. When you come before the commanding officer in an army, you stand at attention. This requires focus and focus requires discipline. It doesn't necessarily matter how you are feeling at the time. It doesn't matter that you have had a bad day or a bad week. You torque up your strength and you stand at attention because of respect. Some of our little troops are in training. The older troops need to be patient with the little troopers, but the little troops must be trained as well. Some of our little troops are old enough to know that they need to be showing respect. It is one thing when a one or two year old is having problems. It is quite another when older children can't stand and sit respectfully. I know that you can't see *the* Commander, only his representative. But that is one aspect of training our children in *faith*. They walk by faith and not by sight. We do things because Jesus commands us to do things, not because we can see this or that.

We also learn from the pattern set for us in Scripture that worship should be *orderly*. God prescribed rites and rituals that made his worship beautiful. Certain sounds told his people what to do at particular times. Have you ever watched a military exercise of marching, gun inspection,

a color guard, etc.? The beauty of those exercises involves the disciplined, practiced movements of the soldiers. It is a military dance that is going on. They don't learn to do those things overnight. But it is having the routine down pat that make it so thrilling to watch. If they looked like a herd of crickets, it would only be funny. One of the beauties of a more fixed liturgy is the fact that people can learn it and, by doing so, dance the military dance beautifully. It requires discipline, practice, a commitment to maintain those things even when you don't feel like it. But God's army is an orderly army. Again, there is a time for more "free-style" prayer and music and such the like. But here, on the Lord's Day for Covenant Renewal, we are gathered formally as God's army for particular purposes. Pray spontaneously in your family. Sing what you want in your car or shower. But this is a different time and a different context. We don't want to look like a herd of crickets.

The militaristic context of covenant renewal also implies that there should be *vigor*. That is, our tone should be lively and full of energy. Again, the liturgy provides us with responses that are done in unison. Respond with gusto ... even if you don't particularly feel like it. Your emotions will be trained eventually. This also says quite a bit about our music and the way we perform and sing it. In this context, sappy love songs to Jesus are just not appropriate. This is true in both words and timbre. There is a certain tone to the music of gathered army singing in unison, preparing for war and/or celebrating victory.

Some may respond, "Well, we are the bride who has a romance with our husband." That is true enough. But the question is, Do we understand love for our husband biblically or are we allowing some other standard to inform us? Look at some of the songs some of the women/brides sang in Scripture. Exodus 15, just after God delivered his armies from the Egyptians, Miriam takes up her tambourine and sings, "Sing to YHWH, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." In Judges 5 we read (or should we sing?) the song of Deborah. Deborah is a mother in Israel (Jdg 5.7). Part of this mother's song was,

Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed. He asked water and she gave him milk; she brought him curds in a noble's bowl. She sent her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen's mallet; she struck Sisera; she crushed his head; she shattered and pierced his temple. Between her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still; between her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell--dead. (Jdg 5.24-27)

In 1 Sam 2 Hannah, another mother in Israel, sings. What does she sing about? She sings about YHWH guarding the faithful ones and cutting off the wicked, breaking them in pieces (1Sam 2.9-10). Mary, in what we call the *Magnificat*, also praises God for the scattering of the proud and the bringing down of the mighty (Lk 1.46ff.). I'm all for singing these biblically feminine songs. They reflect the glory of the husband. They give us a picture of true bride-likeness. Remember that the bride is created to be a helper for the husband. Help to do what? Take dominion. So, she glories in the dominion taken as she participates with him.

The Psalms are the bride's song book, given to us by our husband. We are directly commanded to sing them. And we should sing them with the right tone. You don't prepare an army and/or engage in battle with sappy love songs to Jesus. It may make you feel good initially, but it is not training you for your purpose. Deborah doesn't sing, "O YHWH, how I long for you to hold me, to kiss me, O YHWH, O YHWH, O YHWH." That is not biblical love. That is sentimentalism. Maybe there is a place for it somewhere else, but it is not when the ARMY is gathered.

But this context also rules out stodgy, high-brow music as well. Bach's Mass in B minor and Mozart's in C minor and Handel's *Messiah* are all wonderful pieces of music. But they are for another context. That's all right. Congregational, army, music must be music that can be sung by the masses. It can be somewhat challenging—and should be—but it needs to be immanently singable. Stodgy, high-brow music (as much as I personally like it) is not intrinsically holy. Some people seem to think that if you have any rhythm or if the Psalms and hymns are peppy, you have violated some code of holiness. I submit that it is practically just the opposite. Covenant renewal should be vibrant, emotional, joyful all the while being orderly.

Renewing covenant as the army of God also means that our worship here on the Lord's Day is *purposeful* or *telic*. That is, what we do here looks behind this particular time to the work that needs to be done. This time provides what we need for what is to come. What is our purpose when we are sent out? It is to take dominion. Whether we are "warring" with computers, equipment, or people, we are being prepared for that right here. This means that this worship is not self-contained. We don't do what we do as an end in itself. Therefore, it is not about simply feeling good in the present. It is about preparing you to do what you have been called to do. This is not something that you leave behind. This shapes you up for the week. Whether it feels good in the present or not, you are being prepared. Some weeks may be more enjoyable than other weeks. But our present titillations don't provide the context for what we do or don't do in this service.

I realize that much of what I have said can be taken to the extreme. I'm willing to take that risk. We always have reasons why we don't approach worship in the ways I have described. I can't qualify everything, but please understand that I know that there are many legit reasons why people aren't all that lively. I am speaking about generally ordinary circumstances.

I mentioned earlier that worship is warfare. That ought to tell you something about why doing these things is so difficult. The last thing our enemy wants is for an energized army to head out of these doors every week. It is difficult to get to worship. Yes. It is difficult to torque yourself up to participate. Yes. It is difficult not to go to sleep during the sermon. Yes. Why do you think that is? Certainly some of it may be the fact that there hasn't been adequate preparation. Our enemy does not start the fight when you enter for worship. He is working before and after so that we don't do what we are supposed to do. This is warfare. You are being prepared for more warfare. It is difficult. I am not going to lie to you and say, "If you were really spiritual none of these things would be a problem." No, the more you grow and mature, the more challenges you will face. Some things may become less difficult, but there will be new challenges. I am not downplaying that a bit. But I am saying that you are a soldier in the army of your God. That requires something of you. Face the challenge. You are not an army of one. You are a part of a larger army from which you may draw strength.

In checking the extremes, please understand that I am not calling for some type of *machoism*, where we all grunt and beat our chests. That is as bad of a problem as being worship sissies. That is not biblical manliness any more than the sentimentalism is biblical femininity. I am not calling for *emotionalism* but disciplined emotions. Our emotions must be trained. Therefore, we sometimes need to do things we don't like to do and tell our emotions to get in line. Walking by faith means that we obey whether we feel like it or not. That's what soldiers do because there is a war being fought that doesn't wait for us to feel better about participating.

CONCLUSION

Army of God! Your Commander has called you into his presence for war. He is

inspecting us, shaping us up, and preparing to send us out to battle. We fight here and now in Word, Sacrament, and prayer. God remembers his covenant and fights for us. But he is also preparing to send us out to battle. So, army of God, prepare for war!