

During WWII, there were a number of psychological studies done on members of the military to understand combat stress. Why do some men crack under pressure, while others are unfazed? Why do some men become overwhelmed with anxiety, while others remain cool as a cucumber?

In one particular study, they compared the stress levels of soldiers and fighter pilots. They had expected the fighter pilots to experience much greater levels of stress. They're flying a plane 20,000 feet in the air. Surely that's more stressful than what a soldier does on the ground. But what they found was that the opposite was true. The soldiers on the ground generally exhibited much greater signs of combat stress than the pilots in the air.

The reason was fairly simply: the fighter pilots felt like they were in control. They could see everything for miles around. They knew the exact capabilities and limitations of their planes. They knew exactly what their mission was and how to go about it. And when they were finished, they would return to the safety of an airfield or aircraft carrier and put the danger behind them.

The soldiers, on the other hand, felt completely out of control. They didn't know what was in front of them. What artillery or plane might drop a bomb on their heads. They didn't know what they would be called on to do at any given moment. Their mission could change in the middle of the battle. And when everything was said and done, they were still sitting in a tent or a trench on the front lines of a battlefield. They felt completely out of control. And it drove some of them literally insane.

It is a basic human need to feel in control. Whether you're a soldier on the battlefield, a pilot in a fighter plane, an employee in an office building, or a homemaker taking care of her kids. And when we don't feel in control, things start to break inside of us.

Children will often lash out at classmates and teachers at school if they're suffering abuse. They want to feel in control of their relationships. Young women will often develop eating disorders after they endure rape or sexual assault. They want to feel in control of their bodies. Adults will sometimes develop Obsessive Compulsive Disorder after living through a natural disaster. They want to feel in control of their living space. These are extreme circumstances, of course. But it happens just as much at smaller scales as well.

And we see that in our Gospel Lesson for today. Here we have a group of people who are desperately trying to take control of a situation that is out of control.

First, we have the chief priests and pharisees. Who will do anything to get rid of Jesus. Even if it means killing him. Why? Because he's taken away their power. He's taken away their control. Their control over the people. Their control over their own salvation.

He is teaching that we can never be good enough to keep God's Law. He is teaching a God of grace who chooses to forgive without any merit or worthiness in us. He is teaching that he and he alone can forgive sins and grant eternal life. Which makes the chief priests and the Pharisees and all their endless additions to the Mosaic Law useless. They are not in control. And that terrifies them.

Second, we have Judas. Judas, who we learned last week, finds much of his control in money. As they say, money makes the world go round. If you have money then you have power and if you have power then you have control.

But in today's lesson, Judas hasn't found control in money. No, he's found a different way to gain control: soldiers. You see, John points out that it was Judas who procured the soldiers and officers who come for Jesus. Judas who decided that the best way to arrest Jesus is with muscle. With swords and spears and torches.

And we can criticize him for that. We can laugh at the very notion that any number of soldiers could take control of Jesus. We can shake our heads as we remember the miracles that Judas himself witnessed that show more power than any soldier could provide. What kind of fool is Judas?

But then, we also have to consider a third person we have here: Peter. Peter who tries to find control in the exact same way. By drawing his sword. By trying to hack and slash his way through a cohort of soldiers. Finding control through strength and violence isn't confined to betrayers like Judas. Even a disciple of Christ can be tempted to live by the sword.

And that leads us to our fourth person in this narrative. A man named Malchus. Who we know very little about. Who says nothing at all. And yet, he says so much.

Because, out of all the people in this account who who have lost control, he doesn't have any recourse. He doesn't have the authority of a chief priest or teacher of the Law. He doesn't have soldiers to guard him. As far as we are told, he doesn't even have a sword on his belt.

He is, we are told, a servant, or, more likely, a slave, of the high priest. Stuck in the wrong place at the wrong time. And he ends up with his ear being chopped off. A wound that is not only painful and disfiguring, but one that will bleed profusely and one that has a tremendous risk of infection and death.

Malchus has no control over anything. But he receives a gift that no one else there receives: the healing touch of Jesus. Restoration and wholeness and peace at Jesus' own hands. He has no control over anything, but with Jesus there, he doesn't need control. Because Jesus always has control.

This is the cup that the Father has given Jesus to drink. And so Jesus will drink it. He alone will drink. Not Peter, not Malchus, not even Judas will suffer in order that Jesus goes to the cross for our redemption. He is in complete control.

And the very words he speaks demonstrate that control, that authority over this situation. *"When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground."* He could bring an entire cohort of armed soldiers to their knees with a word. But he goes willingly. He goes with complete control over his own death.

And with complete control over our salvation. Which is the most comforting thing we could possibly hear right about now. Because there are so many things in this world at this moment that we are not in control of.

War. Disease. Famine. Death. Those are literally the four horsemen of the apocalypse and they're all ravaging the earth right now. Does that mean I think the apocalypse is upon us? Who knows? Only the Father. But honestly, it doesn't matter. Because if you're next to Jesus, then everything is under control.

Seek your own control, draw your own sword, and you'll end up living by that sword. You'll end up dying by that sword. Because seeking control over a sinful world through human strength and human wisdom will only lead you further into sin. Just as it did for Peter.

But stay next to Jesus and even when you find yourself attacked and surrounded, and you'll be OK. His healing hand will be upon you. His sacrifice on the cross will be yours. He doesn't need a sword to defend you. Because he has defeated death itself. What good is a sword against a man who can't die? What good is a sword for a man who can't die?

As Psalm 46 tells us, *"He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire."* Because no weapon formed on earth can stand against the one who rose from the dead. Or against those that he calls to be his own.

That's what Paul was talking about in our Epistle lesson: *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction."* There is no greater comfort than that which comes from knowing that you are a child of a God who has everything under control. Even in the midst of your affliction and suffering. Because not one of those who are given to him will ever be lost.

So while we may be soldiers in a great battle between heaven and hell, we have no reason for combat stress or anxiety. We may feel out of control, but our commander has everything under control. The God of all creation, the great I AM, has called us as his own. So let the kingdoms of this earth rage, for we know that every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess, that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.