

“Put on the Whole Armor of God”
13th Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 17
September 3, 2006

Texts: Deuteronomy 4:1-9 / Psalm 15 / Ephesians 6:10-20 / Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Ephesians 6:10-20

¹⁰ Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

¹⁴ Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵ and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; ¹⁶ above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. ¹⁷ And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; ¹⁸ praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—¹⁹ and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

“Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” That is the first verse of Scripture I ever recall memorizing. And, of course, I memorized it from the King James version of the Bible. **THE** Bible. My grandmother taught me that verse. She used to recite that verse to me often. Because she knew that she needed to hear it just as much as I did.

I remember one particular time, when I was seven or eight years old, and she was trying to get me to take a bath. She tried everything, but I sat, determined, with my arms folded. Until she said, “Come on, Greg, give the devil a black eye...take a bath for your grandma!...Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” That did it. I wanted the devil to have a black-eye on my account. So, I took a bath for my grandma.

The passage from Ephesians that was read today was my maternal grandmother’s favorite. But, you had to know her and a little of her life in order to appreciate how important these words of protection and strength were to her. My grandmother was born in 1911 to a Norwegian family in flat, fertile, corn-farming country in central Iowa. She was quiet, even for a Norwegian, but she worked hard and she was a devout and pious Lutheran. She married a man, my grandfather, who worked hard farming his cornfields and beans, but

developed an unhealthy thirst for alcohol early on. Just after her second child was one year old, my grandmother was stricken with polio. At the age of 28, she could no longer use her legs. This once beautiful and vibrant woman was now confined to a wheel-chair. Of course, the hardships of farm life and his wife's diminished health drove my grandfather further and further into the bottle. My grandmother was often left alone on the farm with her two small children while my grandfather drank to his pity and sorrow.

Out on the farm, out in the middle of nowhere, especially in the winter, one can feel quite lonely and vulnerable. But, as helpless as my grandmother may have seemed, she was buoyed by the protection promised by Christ in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. I have this mental picture of my grandmother, not stricken by polio, in a wheel-chair with withered legs, not downtrodden by a neglectful husband, and the weary winters of Iowa, but standing up to Satan, strong and tall, arrayed in the battle armor mentioned in Paul's Letter.

And we would do well to remember these words of Paul during any time of crisis; to realize that our battles are not against "flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." Our battles are not against Adolf Hitler, or Josef Stalin, or Saddam Hussein, or Osama Bin Laden, but against spiritual forces. Some would read this to mean that our battles are against multi-national corporations, or against governments, but this is not true. This is what makes life as a Christian so difficult. It is easy to fight against an Adolf Hitler, or an Osama Bin Laden. It is also easy to fight fire with fire. If someone mistreats you, then it a simple matter to come up with ways to mistreat them back. But, it is quite another thing to see past the bluster, past the ugliness, to the root of the person's problem. Possibly the person is mistreating you because they've had a bad day...or a bad life. Still, that is no excuse for you responding in kind. Christians play by a different set of rules. We cannot return spite with spite, or hate with hate. We cannot despise our enemies. We must treat them as Christ would treat them; with care, and love, and understanding. This is very difficult and it is counter-cultural.

Ultimately, all struggles are a battle between the God of Light, Jesus Christ, and the Prince of Darkness, Satan. All too often, in our day and age, many theologians try to

convince us that there is no person named Satan. Bad things may happen to people, things may occur that are difficult or unsavory, but there is no Prince of Darkness. Tell that to my grandmother. If we can believe in a personal God, why not a personal Satan? The great lie is that Satan, the devil, would love for us not to believe that he exists. For if you don't believe that he exists, then you cannot fight the battle against him. If you don't believe that there truly is a personal Satan, then he has already won the battle. But, Paul is adamant. There is a personal Satan, who we are to pray against without ceasing. Truly our greatest asset during a time of crisis is prayer. Or as Paul says in our reading from today, “praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints” (vs. 13).

Notice also that all of the armor of God is defensive. The only offensive weapon is the Sword, which is the Word of God. Only Scripture can be used as an offensive weapon. The rest of the armor is passive, used only for defense. Secondly, notice that there is no armor covering our backsides. All of the armor is in front of us, Christ alone covers our back. He is behind us, protecting us, encouraging us on in the fight.

But Paul mentions several things that we can take up during a time of crisis. First, of all we can **gird our loins with Truth**. (vs. 14). Isaiah says of God in the 11th chapter of his book,

Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins,
And faithfulness the belt of His waist (Isaiah 11:5).

And what is Truth? Pontius Pilate asks Jesus, “What is Truth?” (John 18:38). And Jesus' reply comes from earlier in John's Gospel, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

Secondly, we can take up **the Breastplate of Righteousness**. This is not *our* righteousness that we take up, for our righteousness is as filthy rags, often called self-righteousness. No, we are to take up God's righteousness. The prophet Isaiah mentions God taking up righteousness as a breastplate in chapter 59, verse 17,

For He [God] 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.

So we see also in this verse from Isaiah, that the **Helmet of Salvation** is also God's. Further, we see that vengeance and zeal for justice are the Lord's, they are part of His armor, they are not included as ours. Vengeance is God's garment and zeal is His cloak. It seems as if none of this armor is really our armor, it is God's armor, thus "the armor of God." God is our armor, for He is Truth, He is Righteousness, He is our Salvation, and it is His Word that is the Sword. We are to take up the **Shield of Faith** which quenches the burning arrows of the Evil One. This type of shield, $\tau\omicron;\nu\ \sigma\upsilon\lambda\eta\omicron;\nu$ in the Greek, refers not to the small round shield, but to the large, rectangular Roman shield, the size of a small door, covered with leather that could be soaked in water and used to extinguish flame-tipped arrows – the arrows of sin and temptation. Often, Roman soldiers would gather together in close formation during an attack, with these large shields overlapping to form an impenetrable wall. And so must we gather together with the faithful, linking our shields of faith, to support and encourage one another during the incessant attacks of the Evil One.

Finally, we are to have our feet shod with **the preparation of the Gospel of Peace**. The Gospel of Peace includes that part of our armor that is most mobile. We are to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

The only offensive weapon in all of God's armor is the **Sword of the Spirit**, which is the Word of God. The word used here for "sword" is a particular sword used by the Roman soldier, called in Greek the $\theta\eta;\nu\ \mu\alpha\upsilon\sigma\alpha\iota\rho\alpha\nu$. It is a short sword, not a long sword or broadsword. It is a short sword because it is to be used in close hand-to-hand combat. It is the sword used once you bring your enemies close to you. So, Paul is saying that the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, is for close-order drills, for the final blow to an enemy or to subdue an opponent. Again, the Word of God is the only offensive weapon and its effect is deadly to enemies, but life-giving to believers.

Still, it is not our words that we are to use against Satan, but God's Words. If Satan gets in your face you are to throw Scripture at him. And each time Satan comes after us, we are to throw Scripture at him. This is the only thing that is guaranteed to keep him at bay.

Of greatest importance in this passage is Paul's understanding that all of this is to be bathed in prayer. He says in verse 18, "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit..." Praying is fundamental to "standing firm" in and for the Faith.

And, finally, why does St. Paul describe this armor of God? Not only as a defense against Satan, but also (verse 19-20), "19...That utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak." Twice he says, so that he might "speak boldly" of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Although every piece of the armor, save one, is for defensive purposes, it is all only to give us confidence and protection as we prepare the thrust of the short two-edged sword of the Word of God. It is all so that we might speak boldly to others of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the final analysis, this piece of Scripture from Paul's letter to the Ephesians is about immersing ourselves in God. He is to be our true defense against anything. To Him only should we turn when in trouble; not to our own resources, not to our own money, not to our own connections; but to Jesus Christ alone and His Holy Word should we turn. Give the Devil a black-eye today. "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." Amen.

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