

Psalm 84
Ephesians 6:10-20

13th Sunday after Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
August 22, 2021

The Whole Armor of God

Introduction to the Psalm

In our Psalm for this 13th Sunday after Pentecost, we hear a pilgrimage psalm of praise. There are familiar and lovely verses about those who trust in the Lord. They know God as a shield enabling them to “go from strength to strength.” Listen to these words from Psalm 84...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

Keith Wentzky told me that our Epistle Lesson today from Ephesians was our dear Jane Kowalski’s favorite scripture. Here Paul wraps up his practical teachings with a series of analogies in which he compares the Christian faith to the armor of a soldier. To be sure, there’s a battle to be fought, but we are not helpless in the battle. Listen to these words from Ephesians 6:10-20...

Sermon

It has been said that Americans value flexibility. We are cautioned to “bend,” and therefore not “break.” “Swim with the stream.” “Go with the flow.” But in our lesson from Ephesians 6, Paul’s counsel to the Christians in Ephesus is to stand firm.

Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. (v. 11)

To be sure, there’s a difference between being stubborn and standing firm. Here Paul is calling us to stand on something that is not transient, but on something that is transcendent and abiding. Something that is renewing and fortifying. Something that gives “bold faith for today and bright hope for tomorrow.” (From the hymn, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.”)

Now, some people cringe to hear Christianity described in military metaphors. For Christianity is a religion of peace, not war. However, the Bible and church history show that military metaphors have long been used. In the 18th Psalm:

The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (v.2)

When the early Christians sought to describe Baptism and The Lord's Supper, they used the word "sacrament". Sacrament comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*, which refers to the oath a Roman soldier took to his commander and his country. As the soldier made an oath to risk everything for his leader and his country, so Christian soldiers pledge themselves to God and his Kingdom. When we offer ourselves and our children in Baptism; when we partake of the Lord's Supper; when day by day, we seek to be Jesus' disciples, we fulfill our oath to Christ and his Kingdom.

And yes, we have grown up singing the familiar hymns, "Onward, Christian Soldiers," "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus, Ye Soldiers of the Cross," "Who Is on the Lord's Side?" "Soldiers of Christ, Arise," and "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Christianity is far from being what Karl Marx once called an "opiate of the people." Christianity is about peace, but at times it's a peace experienced in the midst of battle. Sooner or later every believer discovers that the Christian life is a battleground, not a playground, and that we face an enemy who is much stronger than we are—apart from the Lord.

Paul said we are not contending against flesh and blood—not merely our bodily desires and weaknesses, not with mere mortal men— but against the cosmic powers, against rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

We might put it a little differently, but from experience, as well as from Scripture, we know there is a real power of evil, there is something demonic in the world. Jesus faced it following his baptism, during forty days in the wilderness. We have seen it the September 11 terrorist attacks; in what is happening in Afghanistan today; in people taking up drugs as an escape from the battle. John Calvin said our enemies are such as no human power can withstand.

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing.
(“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”)

Before his execution by the Nazis in 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against the West’s moral failure towards tyranny. His words are strikingly prophetic for our day: “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

Walter Wink, who was Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City, wrote a series of books on “The Powers.” In one of them entitled, *Unmasking the Powers*, he states:

To this day I know next to nothing about the devil, despite all that I have heard and read. Yet, I am familiar with the voice of that “slanderer.” It is the voice that whispers to us, just when we most need to marshal all our abilities in order to perform an important task, “*You’re no good, and you never will be any good. You’re not smart enough, you’ll never succeed in this job. You deserved this, you had it coming, this is what you get. You’re ugly, fat, (or skinny), and unlovable.*”

If we unmask the power of political correctness, we will find in reality much evil. It is the evil that refuses to call a spade a spade. Like when following the fatal shooting at Fort Hood in 2009 by Nidal Hasan, in place of calling it an act of radical Islamic terrorism, the Department of Defense classified it as an act of “workplace violence.” In March of 2013 Florida Atlantic University student, Ryan Rotela, a devout Mormon, was banned from class because he refused to stomp on a piece of paper with the name of Jesus on it, as part of a classroom assignment.

Surely we can all agree that there is a battle to be fought. And Paul is concerned that Christians be able to fight effectively. So he implores us to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might, by putting on God's armor that we may be enabled to stand firm. This armor will provide a kind of "Iron Dome" to deflect the missiles of evil. Put on the whole armor, or as the hymn says, "And take to arm you for the fight, the panoply of God." ("Soldiers of Christ Arise") Not putting on this armor to combat evil would be like Clemson trying to defeat Georgia in their September 4 game in Charlotte, not wearing helmets, face masks, or shoulder and knee pads, or wearing shoes with no cleats.

And of what does God's armor consist? First there is the *belt of truth*. It was the belt which held in the soldier's tunic and from which his sword hung and gave him freedom of movement. It was a sign of readiness for battle. Especially does this text refer to God's truth revealed in Christ. Jesus is the way, *the truth*, and the life. A larger connotation would remind us that any battle fought without truth on its side will ultimately fail. Put on the belt of truth.

Then there is the *breastplate of righteousness*. "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." (Mt. 5:6) Our psalmist declared,

For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness. (Ps. 84:10)

Put on the breastplate of righteousness.

Then there are the *sandals*. The sandals were the sign of one equipped and ready to move. The footwear of the Christian soldier is the gospel of peace. "How beautiful on the mountain are the feet of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace." (Isa. 52:7) There is some-thing paradoxical in presenting the warrior in the midst of battle equipped with the

gospel of peace. But to establish the peace of God, we must do battle with the evil that disturbs that peace.

Then there is the *shield of faith*. For Paul, faith is trust in Christ. The root of sin is not weakness but unbelief. If we are walking close with God, in a right relationship with him, we will know him as our shield against the flaming darts of temptation and evil. God gives us the gift of faith to defend ourselves.

And take the *helmet of salvation*. It is God's intention to vindicate his people and to promote his Kingdom on earth. The Christian can overcome evil by claiming his salvation. Salvation doesn't just mean forgiveness for past sins; it also means strength to conquer sin in the days to come. It means strength to live in the light of God's love and truth.

And take the *sword of the Spirit*, which is the Word of God. "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Mt. 4:4) "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor. 1:18) God says, "My Word shall not return void, but accomplish that which I purpose." (Isa. 55:11) Take the "Word of God" with you.

Thus is outlined the whole armor of God which Paul calls us to put on in our battle against evil. But the Apostle knows that we can be armed to the hilt, and yet not stand, unless we maintain communion with God. So, in verse 18 he says,

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

Prayer is a great weapon against evil. We need to use it every day.

But notice that this weapon of prayer is not just for self. At the end of verse 18 Paul says we are to pray, "making supplication for the saints." That is, we are to pray for all God's consecrated people.

Then in verses 19 and 20 Paul asks for the prayers of the Ephesians for himself:

Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

For sure, to preach effectively, to preach with joyful boldness, a preacher needs the prayers of his people. Pray for me.

My friends, there is a battle to be fought. There are demonic powers arrayed against the Church, against Christians, and against the Kingdom of God. And these assaults require heavenly help to repel. Christian life is not easy; it's hard. To live the Christian life is not to retire behind the lines of safety, but to engage in the battle.

But again, the good news is that we have divinely-given, splendid armor, to fight the battles. It is Paul's conviction that God has placed at our disposal all that is needed to resist and overcome the powers of darkness.

The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Through Him who with us sideth.
("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God")

Put on God's whole armor "that you may be able to stand firm against the wiles of the devil."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.