

Pentecost 12 Yr. B
Proper 16
Ephesians 6:10-20

“Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil...Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” vvs. 10-11, 14-17

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

When I was in college, it was all the rage to wear T-shirts that said something like, “Co-ed naked soccer” or “Co-ed naked firefighting.” I have no idea where the idea came from or why everyone, especially the young men on campus, were wearing them.

A priest in Texas by the name of Kevin Kesselus tells of a T-shirt manufacturer that sold some shirts that had written on the front, “Don’t fight Naked!” And on the back was emblazoned Ephesians 6:11. “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”

What Fr. Kesselus says about this is that today’s epistle reading is akin to saying, ‘Don’t fight naked against evil powers.’¹ What’s more, the armor that will protect us is from God himself.

It is not flesh and blood powers that are fought but cosmic powers and so the help needed, the armor worn must be no less than heaven-sent. We need spiritual resources for spiritual struggles.

This military analogy, may seem strange to us. Our wars are fought on foreign soil and, increasingly from the air, with decreasing hand to hand combat. But for the Ephesians, seeing Roman foot soldiers dressed for battle was not at all unusual. Having soldiers around was just a way of life.

The early Christians in Ephesus were experiencing persecution not from Rome per se, but an increase in hostility from their fellow citizens and even from those in their own community as they gathered and prayed and went about their daily life.

¹ Kevin Kesselus, <http://arc.episcopalchurch.org/sermons-that-work/000903sr.html>

Paul, who had spent three years with them, cared deeply for this community and knew the pressures they were up against, pressures that would not stop at anything less than dividing and conquering this young church. Paul knew all about the pressures that came from the hardness of heart and from the sin that humanity is so prone to.

It is because of the internal as well as the cosmic threat that Paul has written to the Ephesians about maintaining unity, and about keeping themselves immersed in a life of prayer. Ephesians is a letter about how to be the church in a time when being the church was increasingly difficult. The Apostolic witnesses were dying off and the church was going to have to learn to carry on with only the Word of God to guide them.

The truth of the matter is, it has always been difficult to be the church. There have been times when it has been easier than others, but on the whole, the church has always been threatened from within as well as without. We need the words of Ephesians just as much today as the early church needed it in the first century. And because of that I want to take to spend just a few minutes looking at what having the armor of God entails.

First we are told to “fasten the belt of truth around your waist.” This was the same as “girding one’s loins.” The belt wasn’t a small cincture or rope belt, but a thick leather strap that covered the middle of the soldier. I think of the large, thick, belt that the winner of a boxing match receives after knocking out his opponent.

I am also old enough to remember going into a department store with my mother as a little girl. I remember going into a department that had a lot of silly looking things in it as I watched my mother buy something called a girdle. When I asked her what it was she said it was her “foundation.” How put together she was depended on that girdle. It literally stabilized her core.

The belt of truth that Paul writes of is to do no less. It is the foundation from which everything else is put together. The truth of God’s love in Jesus Christ, the truth of God’s redemptive act in the giving of his Son was for the Ephesians, and for us, the core belief. This truth stabilizes us against everything that the world throws at us.

Next comes the breastplate of righteousness. The breastplate for a Roman soldier was a long thick leather or metal shell that covered both the front and the back. It gave protection to all the vital organs, but especially to the heart.

Putting on the breastplate of righteousness means being in relationship with God so that everything is protected. It means having our heart so conformed to God's will for us that the evil one can not enter it or turn it against God, our neighbors, or ourselves.

The knowledge that God loves us no matter what, that God has already paid the price for us and is in relationship with us means we can be assured of God being our defense.

To have a breastplate of righteousness for Paul was to know the freedom and peace one could and would have because the Holy Spirit has entered one's life. There was also a sense of covering oneself with justice and standing firm for justice when threatened by the powers and principalities of evil.

"As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." It is pretty amazing that Paul is writing all about armor, what to take into battle, and then declares that it is a gospel of peace that is to be proclaimed.

Everything that Paul mentions is for defensive purposes, not offense. We are not asked to go out and make war on the evil one, or on one another, only that we respond to attack with the tools that God clothes us with.

The shoes for a foot soldier often had nails on the bottom to help him dig in and take a stand against the enemy. Taking a stand, getting ready for the proclamation of God's kingdom, is what Paul is writing about. Whatever will make you ready and help you to tell the salvation story is what you can use. There are times in our life we must take a stand for something, and there is nothing more important than standing firm in sharing the love of God in Jesus Christ.

We have to be careful here because for thousands of years this text has been used to justify the slaughter of others that believed differently. It has led to militarism and triumphalism and nothing could be further from what Paul intends in this text.

Standing firm for the justice of others and God's kingdom is not the same thing as shoving the Bible down people's throats. But it does mean standing firm, digging in, to hold fast, to speak truth to power, and to point out the evil and the consequences that will occur from the degradation and dehumanization of others. Paul speaks of standing firm for the gospel of peace, not war.

We in Western Church have individualized everything. But Paul wasn't writing to an individual, Paul was writing to a community. Paul was writing about life in community and how evil can wiggle it's way into a community of believers. Paul lets us know that we are part of a community of believers. We are not, as the U.S. Army slogan would have it, "An army of one." We do not face these threats alone. We face them together as a community of faith, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

"With all these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one." Without faith in God we can do nothing, and some theologians believe that without faith, God can do nothing on our behalf.

But with faith as our shield, always being held up to deflect the hostility, the temptations of this world, we can take what comes our way. We can deflect, we can put out the arrows of sin that would try to pierce us, that would try to enter our hearts and kill us.

Faith shields us because faith is the trust we have that God will keep God's promises made to us. We do not have to fear because God has already overcome fear, already overcome death. It is with faith and boldness that we can proclaim the gospel.

"Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God." The helmet of salvation surrounds everything we think about. We live in the knowledge that Jesus Christ died for us, redeemed us, and marked us as his own forever. We are promised the Holy Spirit to guide us and to lead us into a fuller relationship with God. All of this is found in prayer and studying the word that has been given to us as a community.

From head to toe, God wants to clothe us, to give us the tools we need to face the temptations and pressures of a world that is hostile to God's purposes.

There is no part of us God does not want to be covered and protected by his promise of love in Jesus Christ.

God is telling us we don't have to fight evil naked. In his love for us he has given us what we need to prevail in very difficult times and places. We need only look to the martyrs to know that this is true. That the Church grows most where it is under persecution is a witness to God's prevailing.

C.S. Lewis wrote that we make two mistakes: one is that we don't recognize evil and the other is that we give evil too much credence. I think this is what St. Paul was trying to get at.

There are "spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places" says St. Paul. We need to fear them more than we fear flesh and blood enemies, but, having said that, we must rest in the knowledge and faith that God is our sure defense.

The battle for us has already been fought and won. That doesn't mean evil will not keep trying to get it's way, it doesn't mean that we can't be hurt, it doesn't mean we will not die. It does mean however, that nothing in this world, especially not death, can keep us from the God who created us.

When we clothe ourselves in this knowledge, when we make ourselves a community of prayer, we can proclaim the gospel message boldly, no matter the difficulty that may lie ahead. For that let us give thanks!

Amen.