

Armor of God 14th Sunday after Pentecost August 26, 2018

Will you pray with me?

Oh, Holy Spirit, teach us from your word and remind us of your truth. In Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Do I really have to stand up here and convince you that there is trouble out there in the world and in here, in the human heart and mind?

We know that among the joys and blessings of life that there are also moments of trials, of suffering, and encounters with systems that can only be described as evil.

It's easy to identify some of these big difficulties that we can go through.

Divorce.

An unexpected and scary medical diagnosis.

Bankruptcy.

A car wreck.

Any of these big negative moments can be caused by some combination of our own sinful choices, the sinful choices of others, or just the general reality of living in a world that contains both good and bad.

And if I haven't cheered you up enough with this depressing list, I want to turn your attention to the fact that we also face everyday struggles. These are the more common negatives of daily life that can really start to wear us down.

For instance, maybe you're like me, and you have found yourself some nights lying down, trying to sleep, but your mind is for some reason bombarded with bad memories or worry about the next day. It can feel almost like you are under an attack!

But what is the spiritual dimension of all of this? How do every day evils impact our faith, our connection to God and others? What is God doing about all of this?

We find something out about the spiritual nature of life's troubles in today's second reading, the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians from prison, in fact he might have been in prison in the city of Ephesus itself, after surviving a riot of people who attacked Christians in the city.

The Ephesian people understand what it means to have struggles in life, both the big ones like the violence they experienced at the hand of those rioters I told you about to the everyday ones like trying to make a living in a hostile city controlled by businesses built around a false god.

To hear them now, the troubles of these early Christians may sound quite different from ours, but I can imagine there were plenty of people in Ephesus who lost a night's sleep worrying about how the next day was going to go or how they were going to keep their business afloat.

Given all of these worldly concerns, amazingly, when Paul writes to the Ephesians about encountering troubles he focuses on the spiritual nature of the problems in life.

Paul says, “Our struggle is NOT against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Wow. What does he mean by that? How can a man who is in prison—and let me tell you prisons in the ancient world were damp, horrible, underground cells, sort of like being trapped in a stone pit—how can a man in that kind of circumstance focus not on the physical, financial, and material concerns of life and instead point us to the unseen spiritual nature of what we face? What could he mean by that?

Paul means that there are spiritual forces of evil that are at work against us, discouraging us, lying to us, manipulating us, and seeking their own power within human systems. Evil can get ahold of us, causing us to doubt God, hurt one another, and give up on our faith. Evil can chip away at us on those sleepless nights when worries pile up.

Thankfully, at the same time that Paul reminds us or alerts us to the spiritual nature of everyday problems, he also takes time to remind us that God is providing for us and equipping us every day.

Ultimately, we don’t have to give up or give in to fear. Our problems don’t have to swallow us whole.

Paul tells us at the beginning of Ephesians 6 “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.”

We don't have to come up with our own strength, which can fail us. We can rely on God's strength.

We don't have to rely on the strength of our parents, our spouse, our siblings, our teachers, our job, the money we have in the bank, or any of those things.

We can rely on God's strength, which is always there. Always available to us through our relationship with the risen Jesus Christ, the one who died for our sins and rose again and lives in us now through the power of the Holy Spirit. That's the strength and power that Paul is talking about here.

To help us visualize God's strength working in us, Paul uses the imagery of wearing armor.

Now, when I say wearing armor, I know that what is going to pop into your mind is the image of a knight decked out in full plate armor, but please forget this knight. Erase this image.

The armor that Paul is talking about is the armor worn by ancient Roman soldiers, and it is radically different than the armor we see in King Arthur movies or at the Kansas City Renaissance Faire.

If you've seen any movies or read any books that take place in ancient Rome or Greece, it's the type of armor found in those.

Here's what Paul says about this armor in his letter to the Ephesians.

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.

What's fascinating here is that when we look at each piece of this armor we can start to understand some spiritual truths about how God equips and protects us.

First, let me get the two most obvious pieces of armor out of the way. Paul tells us to wear the helmet of salvation. This is our salvation in Christ. We can be assured of this salvation as we are saved by grace through faith. Paul also connects this helmet of salvation to taking up the sword of the Spirit. He says that this sword is the word of God. We can hear from and gather strength from God as we read His messages to us in Scripture. This is our weapon against how we are attacked by evil. It's why when I have one of those nights where worry is keeping me from sleeping I listen to a few verses from an audio Bible on my phone or read a little book of verses that bring comfort. The sword of the Spirit, the word of God is powerful.

Now, let's look at the rest of the armor.

Paul tells us to put on the belt of truth. In the ancient world, the belt holds all of the armor together. But why is it called the belt of truth? It's because evil is deceptive; fear is a liar. So, we need the protection of truth. Just like the belt holds together all of the ancient soldier's armor, truth holds together everything in our life. That truth is Jesus Christ. It is important when we are assailed by difficulties in life that we stay grounded, held together by the truth of who Jesus Christ is and who we are in Christ. We are God's beloved. You are loved and valued by God. Let the truth of Christ hold all that you are together, in all of those difficult moments.

Now that the belt of truth is on, the breastplate of righteousness, the part of the armor, which protects your heart, can go on. When we hear the word “righteousness”, we might flinch because in our society the phrase “self-righteousness” might pop into our minds. However, “righteousness” is a word that by itself we need to reclaim. This is because it’s not our own personal righteousness. The armor that protects us, that guards our heart, is the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Now, we need something to help us to go forward. Paul tells us to put on our feet the readiness to go forward in the Gospel of Peace. Even though we are dressed in God’s armor, we are not going out to fight and be violent. We are to walk in God’s peace and grace. Ancient soldiers at this time wore sandals that had spikes on the bottom of them. This helped them to dig in and stay anchored in place. In the same way, God’s peace is to anchor us and help us dig into life with assurance that we are fully equipped.

Finally, we take up our shield. Paul calls this shield, the shield of faith. The ancient Roman soldier carried a shield that was a large rectangle or oval, almost as big as they were.

Paul pictures us carrying this kind of huge shield, but here is where it gets really interesting. So far, we have been thinking about this soldier by himself or herself. Clad in armor, strengthened by God, ready to face the difficulties of life.

The shield is the final piece that connects us together. Because in ancient Rome, the soldiers would advance with their shields interlocked together, standing side by side. By standing with their shields together, the soldiers created a sort of human tank that the enemy could not get through. Some of the soldiers stood in front, forming the interlocked wall of shields. Some of them stood in rows behind the front line, holding their shields up over their heads and locking them together. In this way, all of the soldiers protected one another with the shields totally covering everyone.

The shield we have is our faith in Christ and it is even stronger when lived out in a community, which we have here at Advent. Together, as the body of Christ, we can join together in faith and help and protect one another.

And to really drive this home, I want to tell you a story that I heard this week that came out of our Rally Day activities last Sunday. This is a story about how all those shields of faith we carry can come together.

Someone came to church this past Sunday in the midst of a hard personal struggle. They worshipped with the community and then stayed to look at all the displays that were up for our Rally Day ministry fair.

While looking at the displays, another person came up to talk to them. As they talked, it turned out these two had experience with a similar struggle. Their conversation was a moment of God strengthening and encouraging them, bringing them together in faith.

Then, that original person was invited by a different group to come and sit with them at our breakfast brunch. So, they went to the brunch and through it got to talk to even more people.

All of these experiences strengthened and encouraged this person who was struggling. The actions of these people gathered together at Advent made a huge difference. God brought together each of our shields of faith to form a strong protective cover.

So, you see, God has equipped us in amazing ways with salvation through Christ, the word of God, the truth of Christ, righteousness, and these shields of faith that we can use to come within community, to be community.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Vicar Emily McQuillan

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