

**Be Strong in the Lord**  
**Ephesians 6:10-20**  
**August 22, 2021**  
**First Presbyterian Church**

Bible Reading

<sup>10</sup>Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

<sup>11</sup>Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

<sup>12</sup>For 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.

<sup>13</sup>Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

<sup>14</sup>Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness.

<sup>15</sup>As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.

<sup>16</sup>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.

<sup>17</sup>Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

<sup>18</sup>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.

<sup>19</sup>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, <sup>20</sup>for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak

### **Sermon**

If there is one thing the Apostle Paul is clear about – following in the way of Jesus is not easy. Of course, he knew this from personal experience – there is a passage in his second letter to the Corinthians where he says: Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; <sup>6</sup>on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; <sup>27</sup>in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.”<sup>1</sup>

So having endured all that, it was certainly not unreasonable for him (at the end of this letter) to be completely honest with the Ephesian Christians that following in the way of Jesus was not easy...

---

<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:25-26

and then to encourage them... implore them, even...

to take up some protection... to put on some armor.

After all, by the time this letter was composed the Christian community was on the radar screen of the Roman authorities... and as I said Paul had been arrested, beaten, snake bit, ship-wrecked and left for dead so many times that everyone was surprised he was still alive. You add to that the conflict within this fledgling multi-cultural church in Ephesus... well, surely the anxiety and uncertainty must have been palpable. So, after spending 5 chapters inviting the church to live up to Christ's calling to unity within itself, Paul turned their attention to the real danger they faced. He writes, "For 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." Yes, the conflicts within the church were real and very troubling, but they absolutely paled in comparison to the real conflict at hand – the battle against none other than the devil himself... against the cosmic powers... against the spiritual forces of evil. So, "armor up", Paul implores. Put on your belt, your breast plate, and your shoes. Take up your helmet, your shield, and your sword. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

It's a speech that had to sound very familiar to these folks.

In fact, it sounds like every call to arms anyone has ever made. There is a compelling call to unity... followed by a clear identification of the enemy... followed by an urgent description of what is at stake... and ending with an adrenaline inspiring call to put on armor and prepare for the battle ahead. Back in this day, that armor would have been made of leather and wood and steel. But wait... the armor for this battle, Paul says... it has all the traditional pieces – but it's not leather and wood and steel. It's truth and righteousness... faith and the Spirit... prayer and whatever makes you ready to proclaim the Gospel of peace. Apparently, the traditional tools of combat are of no use in a spiritual conflict. In fact, the armor of the world, with its weight... with its obsession with self and its innate violence is precisely the WRONG armor in the spiritual conflict that faced the Ephesians. So, Paul shows them the right armor to do the job at hand; it's the truth of the gospel message.... It's living lives of righteousness... it's trusting that Jesus will do what he promises... it's prayer (lots of prayer) ... and it's an abiding, life-giving connection to the Spirit.

Yet I wonder... I wonder how the Ephesian Christians heard that... and how many of them felt like they had these particular tools? How convinced were they of the truth of the gospel?

How righteous were they in the living of their lives? How strong was their faith? How vibrant was their life of prayer... how deep was their connection to the Spirit? And I wonder if THEY wondered if this kind of armor even worked? And if so, how? I do wonder how THEY felt about it... because I wonder how I feel about it.

When I think about all the conflict surrounding us in this world – global conflicts, our political conflicts in this nation, racial conflicts, conflicts within churches, marriage, and family conflicts... I'm painfully aware of two things. First, how quickly we divide ourselves into right and wrong, good, and bad, conservative, and liberal, us and them. And second, how quickly (in the heat of conflict) we put down the armor of faith and pick up the armor of the world. We're so quick to offend and just as quickly offended... so quick to distrust and blame and demonize and cancel (things that only produce a bumper crop of the fruit of this world) ... when the fruit we are to be known by is quite different: love, joy, peace, kindness, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Paul is right – following in the way of Jesus is not easy... and never has been.

We did not read the Gospel lesson assigned for today, but in that story, Jesus is faced with extreme conflict... maybe worse than ever before...

and as his enemies closed in to kill him, he spoke to his followers about the need to eat his body and drink his blood... and how difficult it would be for anyone who wanted to follow him where he was going. He says this at the height of the conflict around him, when those wearing the armor of the world were closing in to kill him... yet instead of a call to put on leather, wood, and steel, he offers himself... his own body and blood... himself. Well, some of his disciples – who heard him say this – they just couldn't fathom what this meant and how this could be effective. So committed to wearing the world's armor, they couldn't fathom this strange notion of "armoring up" with only a bit of bread and a sip of wine. And John tells us that many disciples left him that day.

Those closest to him, however... while utterly perplexed... stayed with him. He asked them straight up, "Do you also want to go away?" but they stayed with him... maybe because what he said rang true to them... maybe because they were beginning to grasp that they had been wearing the wrong armor all along... maybe because they sensed that Jesus, by offering his own body and blood, was offering THEM a whole new way to live.

Hearing this you may be reminded of the story in 1 Samuel where a young shepherd boy named David is preparing to go to battle against the Philistine giant, Goliath.

King Saul, who was a large and strong man, tries to outfit David with his own armor - thinking it would protect him. However, as David put it on, he felt himself so weighed down by it... so constricted in his ability to move... that he knew the armor itself would lead to his defeat...

he knew that this was not the defense he needed. So, he shed Saul's ... got out his sling... and picked up five smooth stones to go out a face Goliath. The takeaway from the story is that David prevailed, not because of Saul's great armor, but because God was with him.

And the takeaway from this story of Jesus is that in the face of "all the spiritual forces that rebel against God" we can prevail because the Lord is with us... though it's just a bit of bread and a small sip of wine, it is for us, his Body and Blood – his very presence.

We might be forgiven for asking whether this spiritual armor is up to the task... whether it works. I mean, how on earth do truth, righteousness, faith, and prayer stand a chance in the face of the destructiveness and violence that are constantly assaulting this world? How on earth does a bit of bread and sip of wine even begin to defend us in cosmic combat? I don't know how... but believe it does. And what I do know is that the traditional weapons of conflict do not work. Oh, they're effective at instilling fear and wreaking havoc on the world... at leaving a trail of suffering and death in their wake. But they do not work to bring about lasting justice and love, peace, and reconciliation.

So, this morning I find myself identifying with Jesus' disciples that day when he offered them his body and his blood... and with that a whole new set of armor with which to fight. I choose to stay with him - knowing it is not easy - I choose to stay with him - not understanding how it all works - I choose to stay with him because what he says rings true to me. And I will try to the best of my ability in all the conflicts and battles of my life, I will try to put on the whole armor of God... and when things get really hard, to keep it on. Truth is I want to be like Archbishop Desmond Tutu was the day he led a worship service in St. George's Cathedral. The South African government had canceled a political rally against apartheid, so they moved it inside the church. Jim Wallis was there... and he said the walls of the church were lined with soldiers and riot police carrying guns and bayonets, ready to close it down at any moment. Bishop Tutu began to speak of the evils of the apartheid system - and how the rulers and authorities that propped it up were doomed to fail. He pointed a finger at the police who were there to record his words: "You may be powerful, he said - very powerful - but you are not God. God cannot be mocked. You have already lost." Then, in that moment of unbearable tension, the bishop seemed to soften. And coming out from behind the pulpit, he flashed that radiant Tutu smile and began to bounce up and down with glee, saying to the police and soldiers: "Therefore, since you have already lost, we are inviting you to join the winning side."

I want to be like that! And if you do too, then ... “... take up the whole armor of God, Stand firm. Fasten the belt of truth around your waist...put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. Take the shield of faith... take the helmet of salvation... take the sword of the Spirit and pray in the Spirit at all times. Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his strength.