**The Whole Armor of God**

**Text: Ephesians 6:14-17**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**August 26, 2018**

“Life is difficult.” With these bold words Scott Peck begins his life-changing book *The Road Less Travelled*.

Life is difficult. That’s why Dr. Peck urges his readers to go deeper than mere therapeutic techniques and tap into the resources of the Holy One.

Yes, life is difficult. And we know this. On any given day there are folks in this town who are wrestling with illness, poverty, grief, family dysfunction, despair, depression and any number of other crises. And it’s hard! Sometimes getting through each day is hard; sometimes getting through even one *hour* of each day is hard.

Family helps. Doctors help. The church helps. And the resources of the Bedford community help. But we’re naïve to think that human resources alone are enough to confront the challenges of life. Because what we’re up against is not merely human. Scripture says that we’re up against “the wiles of the devil.” And then the author of Ephesians explains further:

“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 in the heavenly places.”

In fact, the Greek word here for “ruler” is *kosmokratores*. The word even *looks* evil. And it sounds…like something menacing.

We are up against *cosmic* powers. Therefore, “put on the whole armor of God”. “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of *God’s* power” (Eph. 6:10-11). Because, as tough as life is, and as strong as the forces arrayed against us are, *God’s* power is stronger still.

“Put on the whole armor of God,” the author of Ephesians says, and then he uses the armor of a 1st century Roman soldier as a metaphor to describe the spiritual armor that God would have us wear. Which is ironic because the Roman Empire and its army were among the earthly manifestations of the evil forces that made life so difficult – and so deadly – for the early Church. And the author is no doubt aware of the irony. He’s probably even chuckling to himself at this subtle joke, even as he describes each piece of spiritual “armor” that the Church is called to put on.

Put on the whole armor of God. We’re going to walk through each piece that we’re called to wear, but not in the order that Ephesians follows – which is the order in which a Roman soldier would’ve put on his armor – but rather the order that makes more sense experientially.

**First, there is the shield of faith.**

And faith is to be understood here as *trust*. Not as believing in certain doctrines or ideas, but as trust. Trust in God who is the Beginning and the End of all things. Trust in God who is our Defender at all times. Trust in God who loves us deeply, accepts us unconditionally, and is with us always.

It’s this kind of trust – this kind of faith – that I was trying to encourage last week when I spoke of how our salvation is assured and cannot be withdrawn. It’s similar to the way in which I trust Helen’s love. I mean, we’ve been good friends since we were teenagers. If there was something about me that was deeply offensive to her, our relationship would’ve ended a long time ago. I know that there’s nothing I can do that would cause her to withdraw her love. I’m not afraid that Helen might somehow stop loving me. There’s great freedom in such trust.

And if the spousal image doesn’t do it for you, then think of a sister, or a brother, or a best friend; someone who loves you so much that you *know* that love will never end. That’s how God loves you. You can *trust* that love. You can have *faith* in that love. And *shielded* with that faith, you can forge ahead – *we* can forge ahead – against whatever forces may stand before us. So put on the shield of faith, *and*…

**The helmet of salvation**

Salvation precedes faith, of course: we have been saved by grace in eternity and then we receive that blessing through faith in history. But we have to *trust* God before we can experience the *fullness* and the *power* of that salvation. Ephesians begins and ends with an assurance of our salvation: sealed in Christ before the foundation of the world and revealed to us – made *real* to us – each and every day by the Holy Spirit. And on those dark days when we doubt our salvation – on those difficult days when God seems very distant – let the words of scripture remind you that nothing in all Creation – not even a cosmic ruler, no matter how powerful – *nothing* can separate you from the love of Christ Jesus our Savior.

Armed with that knowledge, you hold in your heart…

**The sword of the Spirit**

And yes I do mean “in your heart,” not “in your hand,” because what we’re talking about here is *spiritual* warfare, and spiritual wars are ultimately fought in the human heart. Gandhi said that that’s where the *most* important battles are fought, and the only place where battles *ought* to be fought.

You see, the primary enemy to be overcome in all battles is fear. And fear resides in the heart. If you overcome fear, you can face whatever confronts you.

So the sword of the Spirit first of all slays our fear. It’s when we’re afraid that we’re most vulnerable to the forces of evil. In our fear, we can turn tail and run away. Or, worse yet, evil can tap into our fear and seduce us.

Here Ephesians points us back to Psalm 23: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” As Frederick Buechner notes, the Psalmist “Does not pretend that evil and death do not exist. Terrible things happen, and they happen to good people as well as to bad people. Even the paths of righteousness lead through the valley of the shadow. Death lies ahead for all of us, saints and sinners alike, and for all the ones we love.  The psalmist doesn't try to explain evil. He doesn't try to minimize evil. He simply says he will not *fear* evil. For all the power that evil has, it doesn't have the power to make him afraid.”

We are not afraid because God is with us. That’s the shield of faith. We are not afraid because we have been saved by God’s grace. That’s the helmet of salvation. We are not afraid because God has placed in our hearts the sword of the Spirit. We’re not just talking about a rod and a staff here; we’re talking about a sword! A metaphorical sword, of course; but on more than one occasion that spiritual sword has helped me to stand firm against the seductive wiles of the devil and stare down the powers of evil. We might still be afraid in such situations, but we need not be *controlled* by our fear. Because God has placed, in each of our hearts, the sword of the Spirit. With that spiritual sword, we can stand firm, and move forward, *despite* our fear. Especially when that sword is held in place by…

**The belt of truth**

The truth is powerful, and the truth is real. Yes, we each have our *perspective* on truth, but that doesn’t mean that there is no such thing as objective truth (despite what Mr. Giuliani might think); that doesn’t mean that we can just make stuff up. We have to work hard to find the truth. Evidence must be weighed, logic must be used, experience must be analyzed, the Bible must be studied, science must be considered, and things that we know to be lies must not emerge from our lips. Because, as Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free (John 8:32); and as experience tells us, the truth will eventually come out. Besides, if you tell the truth all the time, life is much easier because you don’t have to remember what you told to whom in order to keep your stories straight!

With the belt of truth, one’s spiritual armor is almost complete. All it lacks is…

**The breastplate of righteousness**

Which has to do with actions that are virtuous; actions that are consistent with God’s will. Such actions are characterized by fairness; with being equitable in one’s dealings with others. One who is righteous does not play favorites, because God does not play favorites. As scripture reminds us, God shows *no* partiality (Acts 10:34). God’s love is poured out upon all: the prosperous and the homeless, the native-born and the immigrant, the conservative and the liberal, the one who’s easy to get along with and the one for whom extra grace and patience are required. None of the above have some special standing in God’s kingdom, and none of the above are demoted to second class citizenship in that same kingdom. All are held firmly in God’s embrace. And the one who puts on the breastplate of righteousness has heeded Jesus’ advice to “go and do likewise.”

That’s it for the armor. But we have one more article of clothing: not really military boots but more like running shoes, for we are to wear...

**Swift shoes to proclaim the gospel of peace**

And again, note the irony, because here we have all of this military imagery, but in the end we are to proclaim the gospel of *peace*. Which reinforces the notion that the author has a sense of humor while being deadly serious.

That’s what we’ve been talking about throughout this series on Ephesians: the gospel of peace. *Christ* is our peace. He has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. He has brought warring factions together and knit them into one body. He has helped this congregation to move from the infighting and back-biting and behind the doors scheming of a few years ago and reunited you all into the incredibly warm group of folks that you’ve always been at your core.

Christ is our peace. Not money or Sunday attendance or standing in the community or who’s been a member the longest.

Christ is our peace. Not Caesar or guns or the market or any other potential idol.

Christ is our peace. You see…

**Underneath all of that armor…**

there’s just an average guy, no different from you or me. It’s not about all of the physical ways in which we try to protect ourselves. It’s about the spiritual reality of Jesus Christ dwelling in your heart, and the spiritual power that his presence there provides. It’s the peace and the power of the Christ to which all of this armor imagery points. It is because Jesus has chosen to be with us that we can dare to move forward against cosmic foes and into the future that God has prepared for us. Tapping into his presence through the power of prayer, we can do all things. Because God in Christ has strengthened us. Because God in Christ has reconciled us. Because God in Christ has equipped us with all that we need to engage the foe and live into our Future Story.

Put on the whole armor of God, so that we may be able to stand against all of the difficult challenges of life. Put on the whole armor of God, so that we can move forward against the cosmic forces of this present age. Put on the whole armor of God, so that we can be strong in the Lord and in the strength of God’s power. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ love and righteousness. To him be the power and the glory; now and forevermore. Amen.