

Sermon *The Whole Armor of God*
Worship in the Park September 18, 2016

[The Apostle Paul wrote to the Church at Ephesus] Finally, be strengthened by the Lord's powerful strength. Put on God's armor so that you can make a stand against the tricks of the devil. We aren't fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens. Therefore, pick up the full armor of God so that you can stand your ground on the evil day and after you have done everything possible to still stand. So stand with the belt of truth around your waist, justice as your breastplate, and put shoes on your feet so that you are ready to spread the good news of peace. Above all, carry the shield of faith so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word. Ephesians 6 10-17 Common English Bible

We were at Jack London Square last night celebrating our son's birthday and after dinner we walked around. There's a bowling alley there with arcade games, and I saw a young man shoulder a gun, put it to his eye, and take aim at the video game target. I grew up sitting on the counter at Gene's Sports Shop in Novato where my father taught hunter safety, and I learned to shoot a gun when I was pretty young. Gun violence is so shockingly prevalent in our culture that it isn't shocking anymore, just horrible. It was creepy and a little scary to see a young person take such careful aim and squeeze the trigger... at a pretend target. We got in our car in Oakland and the news was live, reporting the bombing in the Chelsea neighborhood in New York City. Not an act of terror, the mayor said, but it was intentional. It seems like too fine a line to distinguish between intentionally setting off a bomb to harm people and destroy property, and an act of terrorism.

It's tempting to believe that we can arm and defend ourselves against our enemies with guns or threats. As the list of ethnic and religious and international enemies grows, how do we respond? Do we build bigger weapons? Do we build longer walls? Do we leave those decisions to people in power, people invested in maintaining

and protecting their own power? When I chose this scripture for today's worship... in this peaceful little neighborhood park... I didn't realize the military images in Paul's letter to the Ephesians would sound so painful in the world today.

Earlier in his letter, Paul wrote, "Renew your thinking by the power of the Holy Spirit and clothe yourself instead in God's image in justice and true holiness." Then he wrote to husbands and wives, advising them to be mutually submissive and respectful to each other, and to children and parents, telling them to be careful in their treatment of each other, and then to slaves and masters about obedience and fairness. This was a culture of Roman military oppression, and a household culture of hierarchy and inequality... and Paul wrote to the church about what to wear when dealing with the enemy... which could include the person who has all the power. The enemy, he said, is not flesh and bone, but evil and darkness (within and without) and the usual armor won't stand up in this battle.

Instead, he told the church to put on the whole armor of God in order to stand firm. We are, today, surrounded by fear-mongers on every side... and truthfully there is much in the world to be afraid of. But put on the armor of God and stand firm. To stand firm is to not give into fear, or give into fear's siblings, anger and hatred and revenge. To stand firm is to stand in the presence of God, confident of God's love, for you... and for all people.... Surprisingly and shockingly, even the enemy. If you're able to stand right now, stand up, stand firm, in the knowledge that God holds you in the palm of God's hand, and that nothing... and in his letter to the Roman church, Paul makes a list of enemies, and says that no enemy, and no-thing can separate us from God's love. So stand firm as a child of God. (Now you can sit down.)

Next put on the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness. (Would someone find the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness, and bring it to us?) To be righteous is to be holy, and to be holy is to be like God... to be loving, merciful, and transparent. And so even though the breastplate of righteousness covers your heart, let others see your heart. Let's say something from our hearts to the people sitting near to us. Let's tell them: Jesus loves you, and I love you. Paul told followers of Christ to wear truth and righteousness... to be honest, authentic, and holy.

Next Paul said to put on footwear that's going to allow us (and all of Jesus' followers) to walk everywhere and tell others about Him, and to teach and work for peace in His name. Until the year 313 Christianity was illegal under Roman military law, and yet Paul told the church to wear shoes that would proclaim Christ and the gospel of peace. (Will someone find the shoes of the gospel of peace and of proclaiming Christ?)

Do the shoes you wear give you strength and flexibility to take this journey of following Jesus... walking in His footsteps, learning of Him, letting Him reform you in His image? Do the shoes you wear bring hope and peace - Christ's own peace - to all people?

Paul said the church is to put on the shield of faith for protection against "the flaming arrows of the evil one" and the helmet of salvation. (Would someone find the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation? All the pieces of the armor of God are hung in the trees here in the park.) The shield of faith and the helmet of salvation help us to stand firm, knowing that nothing can separate us from God's love. Some of us were born with strong faith, some of us have grown into mature faith (all of us have to grow in faith... God is never done working in us and perfecting us) and some of us

choose to believe. Faith is a gift... and it is also a choice. It's like curly hair. (You may have noticed how much I think about curly hair. I think it's because I was deeply influenced in my formative years by Charlie Brown's sister, Suzie, who saw her redeeming characteristic as her naturally curly hair, and because my mother was so enamored by home permanents. If you don't know what a home perm is count yourself as extremely lucky.) My point is that while some people are born with curly hair, some have chemically-enhanced curly hair; some choose curly hair. So faith is a gift that some are born with or taught and modeled for us, but it's also a choice. When we stand firm in God with the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation we choose to believe that God is with us... that we are the beloved and redeemed people of God. Once more as you're able stand up... stand firm with the shield of faith [hold hand out in front as if holding shield] and the helmet of salvation [put hand on head.] Now please be seated.

The last piece of the armor of God is the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. It's important... it's crucial... for followers of Christ to know scripture (the word of God) and know Jesus (who is called the Word of God.) In the Hebrew Scriptures to "know" someone is to be intimate with them. (Would someone find the sword of the Spirit?) Knowing scripture and knowing Jesus Christ are more than head-knowledge. We need to experience scripture, and experience the life-saving love Jesus offers us. That really is a group exercise. I don't think we can experience all that scripture has for us, and all that Jesus wants for us, by ourselves. We need a community, a church, to learn, to practice with, and to perfect us. So the sword of the Spirit is something we hold together... not a single person but the whole community who learns and grows together.

The final piece of armor isn't something to wear, but something to be surrounded with: prayer. Imagine a canopy over you... like this canopy of trees above us... and imagine prayer as a canopy over you, over us, over all the world. Pray. Pray like it matters. Pray like it changes things. Pray like it will change you into the likeness of Christ. Whatever methods of security we count on... God's love is our best defense against fear and fear's siblings hate and anger and revenge. God's love is our best armor against the powers of darkness that are around us, and within us. Let us pray.