

August 22, 2021

“Armor Yourselves in Peace?”

Scripture Reading

Ephesians 6:10-20

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Sermon

“Armor Yourselves in Peace?”

I remember a feeling back in October of 1982 when I first went to the quartermaster’s building of my unit and was fitted to be a soldier. I was given my Battle Dress Uniform, utility belt, vest, boots, helmet and issued my weapon.

I still remember the smell of the supply area, it smelled something like new clothes, moth balls and motor oil mixed together. Still today when I walk into a camping store or military surplus store like Sherpers in Port, I remember that feeling that I felt at nineteen, that I was protected, powerful and ready for anything and in some weird way I felt safe and invincible. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life at that age, I had no idea of what kind of person I wanted to be, but I knew I liked that feeling.

The author of Ephesians uses this image, a military image to encourage the Ephesians in the scripture this morning, but he is using this image in a very different way than what I felt when I first put on the armor of the US Army.

As much as I like to feel safe and protected, that isn't what the author is promising will protect us against the cosmic powers of darkness. What protects us isn't weapons, breastplates, or helmets but rather the whole armor of God protects us.

Fasten the belt of truth, put on the breastplate of righteousness and put on shoes for your feet that will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, a helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit.

Putting on the armor of God isn't about preparing to fight, it's about preparing to love. It's about having faith that God is with us, all of us. Finding our salvation in knowing that all the time and knowing that no matter what, we are going to be okay, because we are with God now and we will be with God forever.

This image was completely counter cultural at the time to the Roman Empire that was based on violence, domination, hierarchy, subjugation and control. That is not what is pleasing to God, yet it continues to be the default position of our species.

Let's unpack some of the parts of this image a little. The first is to tell the truth, to live in truth, be true to who you are, show the people you love what your truth is on the inside too, be honest. Don't make stuff up, don't believe made up stuff, don't use lies to protect yourself from feeling vulnerable or unprotected, because you aren't. And the word righteousness, that is not necessarily about following a set of rules perfectly, like the ten commandments or all the things the bible said you should or shouldn't do.

It is better defined as leading a life that is pleasing to God. Remember what Micah said about this, what pleases God, what the Lord requires of us is "to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God. What pleases God is when God's people are living lives where everyone has enough, where people live free and with equity. What pleases God is hope, compassion, empathy, caring, fairness, love and justice.

These are the acts of a righteous person, who are living their best life that is pleasing to God. Matter of fact Paul (we'll say Paul for the sake of time even though the authorship of this letter is in question) Paul is actually quoting Isaiah 59 which deals directly with Justice. It reads:

"The Lord looked and was displeased, that there was no justice.

He saw that there was no one,

 he was appalled that there was no one to intervene;
so his own arm achieved salvation for him,
 and his own righteousness sustained him.

He put on righteousness as his breastplate,
and the helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on the garments of vengeance
and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.”

God was upset that there was no one to do Justice in the world so God decided to take care of it. But Paul thinks the newly founded Christian community walks with the power of God and has taken up the work of God, which means to Paul the work of Justice. Not justice, like vengeance but God’s justice which is about fairness, equity, setting things to rights on a personal and communal level.

We know this when we see the difference between these two passages is that Isaiah says that God wraps up in a cloak of Vengeance. Centuries later Paul, influenced by Jesus does not. Paul gives this metaphor an upgrade by removing the word vengeance and focuses instead on boldly proclaiming the gospel of peace

The Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay, who authors the UCC online resource for preachers says this about peace. “Even the pages of the Bible reveal the pervasiveness of the language of war, battle, and violent struggle. Peace, defined as the absence of conflict, seems elusive enough, but the concept is a minimized reflection of the ancient ideal of shalom.

Shalom is defined as ‘everything as God intends it to be.’ That doesn’t sound like fighting. It sounds like the garden. It evokes images of lush abundance, fertile landscapes, clear and clean skies and water, and harmony between humanity as part of creation, not above or below.”

I am proud to have served my country but I was a mess at 19. I needed that armor because I was hurting but today I get a choice, today we all get a choice to put on the whole armor of God. To wake up and when we get dressed in the morning think about what we are going to cloak ourselves in.

Can we start our day centered in, wrapped up completely in the whole armor of God? Can we put on a garment of prayer, thinking of others and lifting them up to God and asking for God’s help to be fair to others in the day ahead.

Can we seek out God’s help so you can see the places we need to work toward equity for all God’s people? Can we fasten that belt of truth, to be our authentic selves and let the words that come out of our mouths be truthful and kind and humble?

Can we try to think of the day ahead not as a battle, but as an opportunity to share the love of God everywhere we go and do God's work in the world? This won't protect us, as you well know, from the hard things in life like illness and loss, but it will protect us from the darkness, whoever or whatever, or however you see evil, maybe as an entity like the devil, or maybe as the absence of God.

You can protect yourself from the hopelessness, the self loathing, the denial, fear and selfishness that darkness can try and drag you into by putting on the whole armor of God, dress yourself not for conflict but for justice, for love and peace. May it be so, AMEN

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REV. SUSAN DRAKE