

Twelfth Weekend After Pentecost (B/RCL)
Ephesians 6.10-20
August 22-23, 2009
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ
“The Armor of God”

Our sermon today begins with Show-and-Tell, featuring my husband, Mark ☺. [Mark comes forward with large bag, and extracts body armor, i.e. bullet-proof vest, combat helmet and Army boots from it.]

As an Army chaplain, Mark is a non-combatant. He doesn't fight, so he doesn't carry a weapon. By Geneva Convention rules, he's not **allowed** to carry a weapon. When Mark is in a combat zone, his chaplain's assistant is equipped with a firearm and serves as his bodyguard. Although Mark doesn't **want** to carry a gun, and isn't **permitted** to, he was allowed and **required** to wear the body armor you see, when he worked in the Green Zone in Baghdad, an area frequently hit with mortars and threatened by snipers. He's probably uncomfortably warm wearing all this stuff even in a safe, air-conditioned sanctuary. We can only imagine what it's like for our servicemen and women working out of doors in the Mid-East where temperatures can reach between 110 and 120 degrees. Mark's going to remove the body armor now, and rejoin us up front later ☺.

You've probably figured out that I asked Mark to wear these distinctive work clothes to worship today because of the lesson from Ephesians 6 (vv. 10- 20), about wearing the full armor of God. The letter writer paints a picture of a 1st century Roman soldier, whose gear was intended to protect him from injury in battle. He's drawing a metaphor with our Christian life.

- **Point #1:**each one of us is engaged in mortal combat with an invisible but powerful enemy whom we must not underestimate: the devil.

The battle is spiritual; it's our souls not our bodies that are at risk. That means the stakes are even greater than in a war between nations. Remember what Jesus said in St. Matthew's Gospel?

“Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matt. 10.28)

Nothing delights the devil more than to convince us he does not exist. It is a modern and false belief that evil is simply the absence of good. The saying is true that all it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing, but that’s not the same as defining evil as merely the absence of good. Evil is something, not nothing. It’s its own entity, a real force furiously at work in the world, trying to dismantle and destroy everything God has done in creating and in redeeming the world.

As adamantly as Christians believe in God, so strongly do we believe in the existence of the devil, Satan, the Evil One, the Deceiver, different names for one reality. Every time we baptize we affirm our own baptism and we renounce evil. The pastor asks sponsors, parents, confirmands, the whole assembly of believers:

- Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?
- Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?
- Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?

And we respond, “I renounce them,” recommitting ourselves to claiming and following Christ as our Lord and turning on our backs on everything that calls us into darkness rather than light.

If the **1st point** of the armor of God metaphor is that **we should recognize and not underestimate our enemy**, the devil,

- The **2nd point** is that **we should not underestimate our God**, and our God’s power to equip us for battle and hand us the victory.

The first verse of the passage, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power” could be more accurately translated as, “be strengthened in the Lord.” The verb is passive. We can’t put on our own armor. Someone else, God, has to do it for us. It’s like the medieval days when knights needed squires not just to take care of their battle steeds, but also to help them get dressed! The armor was so heavy that a knight couldn’t dress himself, couldn’t climb up onto

his horse onto his horse under his own steam. The verse “Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit,” would be better translated as, “**Receive** the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit.” The first century version of squires **handed** those items to the Roman soldier as he prepared for battle. We **receive** their spiritual equivalents directly from the Lord.

Most of the aspects of armor mentioned in this passage are defensive, meant to protect the wearer when attacked during an. The shield is used to parry blows, but also to deflect burning arrows, dipped in tar and set ablaze before they were launched. Roman shields were door-shaped, rectangular, made of 1 or 2 layers of wood, and covered with animal hide. Right before battle they were soaked in water, so that if the enemy shot burning arrows, the shields would extinguish the flame instead of being ignited. The letter to the Ephesians says our spiritual shield is faith....

When we’re honest with ourselves, we have to admit that despite our best intentions, we fall easy prey to temptation. Looking back at times when our lives seemed to have been going down in flames, we may realized we set the match to the kindling ourselves. So, if God wants to outfit us with protective armor, to save us from the devil’s wiles and our own weakness, how do we accept the offer??

Prayer, prayer, prayer.

“Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.” (Eph. 6.18a)

Remember Anne LaMott’s confession in *Traveling Mercies* that she only has two prayers in her repertoire? “Help me, help me, help me,” and “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” We shouldn’t underrate the wisdom and faith behind, “Help me, help me, help me.” It shows:

a) that **we recognize and do not underestimate our enemy**, the devil, and

b) that **we do not underestimate our God**, our God’s power to equip us for battle and hand us the victory. We know the strong Advocate to whom we can turn: our Lord Jesus Christ, who, as the letter to the Hebrews says, never stops interceding for us.

I'm going to ask our model to come up to the front again ☺. As we said before, Mark is a non-combatant. He doesn't carry an earthly weapon. But since he is a chaplain, he **does** carry the only offensive, spiritual "weapon" mentioned in Ephesians. [Mark pulls a Bible out of his pocket.] It is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (Eph. 6.17) Only those with eyes to see realize that the Bible is more powerful than worldly firepower could ever be.

Listen to one of the verses Martin Luther included in his hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God":

Though hordes of devils fill the land all threat-'ning to devour us,
we tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us.
Let this world's tyrant rage; in battle we'll engage!
His might is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail!
One little word subdues him.

Have you ever wondered what that "one little word is"? "Jesus" – the Word of God to whom all of Scripture points.

We are not strong enough to protect ourselves or our loved ones or our world from the Evil One, but God is. Through prayer, we allow the Lord to dress us in the armor of God and to arm us with the Word of God, our most powerful weapon against the devil. To quote Jesus:

"In the world you face persecution [from all the forces of evil, human and spiritual]. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (John 16.33b-c)

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham