

Standing Firm in God's Armor

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 21
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, August 23, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

While shopping at Capital City Mall recently, my daughter Rebecca and I noticed a cubicle you can enter in which a person can experience hurricane-force winds. For \$2 you can stand in this little booth and feel what it's like to be in a 78-mph gale. Rebecca kind-of wanted to try the booth out. I kind-of didn't want to spend the \$2 (having just pretty much emptied my wallet with back-to-school clothing purchases). Instead, I suggested we experience those hurricane winds vicariously by watching someone else pay the \$2 and enter the cubicle. Which is what we then did. Whoo-whooh!

I noticed the person didn't lose their footing in the cubicle, but they did have trouble staying in one place. I suppose that having a wall to lean against made it a safe experience. Fluffed the hair, ruffled the clothing, but little more. Out in the open, perhaps the experience of 78-mph winds would be a bit different.

This summer while on a cruise, I walked the top deck of the ship daily for exercise. Five laps around was one mile. There certainly was no hurricane, but some days were tougher than others. If the cruise ship was merely going, say, 20 or 22 knots through the water, and the wind was blowing in the opposite direction across the deck at, say, 15 mph, I'd still be experiencing winds of at least 40 mph. One day it was just that scenario. I had quite a bit of trouble. Standing in place had its problems, but moving forward was even worse. The moment I lifted up one foot, the wind would catch me off-balance. A gust had me tottering this way and that, like a drunken sailor, and I felt very, very small. I remained on my feet, but not without difficulty. I cannot imagine winds of 78-mph on that deck. The next day we were in port, so walking that mile was a breeze—because there was no breeze. In that case, it was easy to stay on my feet. I could have walked mile after mile. (Of course, it was time to eat again from the buffet so I had to go down below. But theoretically I could have walked much further.)

You know, when I studied today's lesson from the book of Joshua where Joshua asks the tribes of Israel who have gathered at Shechem to choose whom they will serve—the Lord God, or some other god of their neighbors or their ancestors—and they all say they choose to serve the Lord God...when I studied this lesson I kept on thinking, well, not much of a stiff breeze blowing in their lives at that moment. It appeared to be clear sailing into the promised land of Canaan. Things were looking good for the Israelites compared to what they'd gone through already. No more slavery in Egypt. No more wilderness wandering. No more eating boring manna. Victory over their enemies. How simple it was to stay on one's feet, firm in conviction and faith, and say, "...therefore we...will serve the Lord, for he is our God." It's always easier to stand firm when the wind isn't blowing.

But I have a sneaking suspicion that Joshua realized their solemn declaration here at Shechem wouldn't be the last time a leader in Israel would have to call the people to a choice. Whom will you serve? Are you going to stand firm and serve the Lord God who made you and called you? The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob? The God who helped Moses lead you out of Egypt? The God who's been with you all along? In fact, as chapter 24 continues, Joshua will reiterate two more times the importance of this choice they are making that day—a matter of life and death. I think Joshua knew that critical choice would have to be made again...and again. So Joshua says “Choose this day whom you will serve...” (And then I'll be back tomorrow to ask about tomorrow. Because tomorrow the winds might be a'blowin'.) Just because the tribes of Israel **today** could imagine themselves being faithful to the Lord God from henceforth and forevermore didn't mean that **tomorrow** these Israelites could remain standing, feet planted firmly on the ground, upright and strong as the people of this particular God. Especially not when buffeted by the struggles of daily living, or when challenged by other people and their gods, or when tempted to serve some other god who looked better or seemed to offer more benefits, guaranteed.

Such winds still blow in our lives and buffet us. They threaten to catch us off balance, making us waver in our faith and trust. Waver in our commitment to God and his holy ways. And thus we waver in doing what such faith and commitment require of us. *As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.* Wonderful platitudes, aren't they? At least until we face situations where having made such a choice, we discover just how difficult it is to follow through and stand firm in that choice.

So what if we were baptized years ago and brought into the family of God by our own parents. So what if we affirmed that baptism when confirmation age arrived. So what if, as an adult, we became part of the Church through some other means. That was yesterday; today is today. And **today** our feathers got ruffled when someone here said something hurtful to us and we're still angry about it and if you think we're going to shake hands with them at the Peace you've got another thing coming. Or we had words with a family member this morning—words we probably shouldn't have said, but we did—and now, if only we could take those words back. Or we are absolutely dreading tomorrow and the office and the boss and the fellow employees and the mammoth workload, and we'd leave that job tomorrow if we could afford to, but we can't. Or we are worried—so worried we can hardly think straight—about these medical symptoms we've been having lately. Or we sit on a panel or board or council (or a churchwide assembly, for that matter), and the decisions we have to make have profound consequences. We feel the burden of these decisions, and wonder what way to vote—yea or nay—and who will be impacted by that vote. And we wonder how we are live with and love those who disagree with our vote. Or we're afraid to admit it, but we're actually going through a kind-of dry spell in our faith, don't really know what we believe in or who we believe in or where the heck God is anyway. Today brings no delightful, refreshing breeze. No. We're just trying to stand upright, and the wind—whoa! It's hitting us full in the face and nearly knocking us off our feet.

So, how are we to remain on our feet? How do we stand and, in fact, move forward resolutely in the face of such winds? What keeps us from giving up and going down below deck, or giving in

and letting the wind take us in its own particular direction, and possibly far astray from the choice and commitment we made? How do we trust God to guide us through?

Paul in his letter to the Christians at Ephesus attempts to address these questions. And four times Paul encourages the Ephesians to stand strong, stand firm against the devil and all evil forces. Four times! Paul writes: *...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...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...*

The point for Paul is that no matter what human resources we might use in order to stand firm in our unwavering commitment to God, our human resources are ultimately inadequate for the task. We are vulnerable to all kinds of attack—every day doubt and despair, greed and selfishness, anger and prejudice, attempt to find an opening, a chink in our armor, a way into our hearts and minds. Every day we face troubles and frustrations for which we ourselves are woefully equipped. The only way to stand firm in the faith, says Paul, to live by our choice to serve God, is to wear weapons of the Spirit—armor not made by human hands but, rather, fashioned by the Lord God in all his might. Only by putting on such spiritual armor—having fastened the belt of truth around our waist, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, having shod ourselves with shoes ready for proclaiming the good news of God’s peace, having taken up the shield of faith and placed on our heads the helmet of salvation, and drawing the sword of God’s powerful Spirit—only then are we prepared. Only then, capable of standing firm and strong. Only then are we ready to do battle against those things that would threaten to turn us away from God. Only then can winds blow—even full force—and we will not be easily toppled. Only then—encased in this incredible strength of God can you and I ever begin to speak words of forgiveness and reconciliation and love, spend the fullness of who we are for a needy world, act with courage when others turn back, and truly experience the peace and joy God offers so freely.

It is this very Spirit, supplying the armor we so desperately need, which was promised by our Lord Jesus first to his disciples. It was this Spirit, poured out upon those disciples at Pentecost. And it is this Spirit which has been called upon and prayed for in the life of this congregation and all its people, a Spirit that has been at work among us all along.

Many of you know that, when I offer the “Dismissal” at our worship service’s end, I always say something like this: *Go in peace. Serve the Lord.* Our response is always something like this: *Thanks be to God.* And then we add the additional response that has its roots at Camp Nawakwa, if I’m not mistaken. Many of us say, *We will.* Do you understand? This is like our own gathering at Shechem. I guess you could say that Joshua has summoned **us** together, this day. We stand with generations of God’s people before us, and behold the same daunting task of choice, of commitment, of faithfulness in the face of great challenges. So, choose this day whom you will serve...

May this household serve the Lord. **AMEN.**

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