

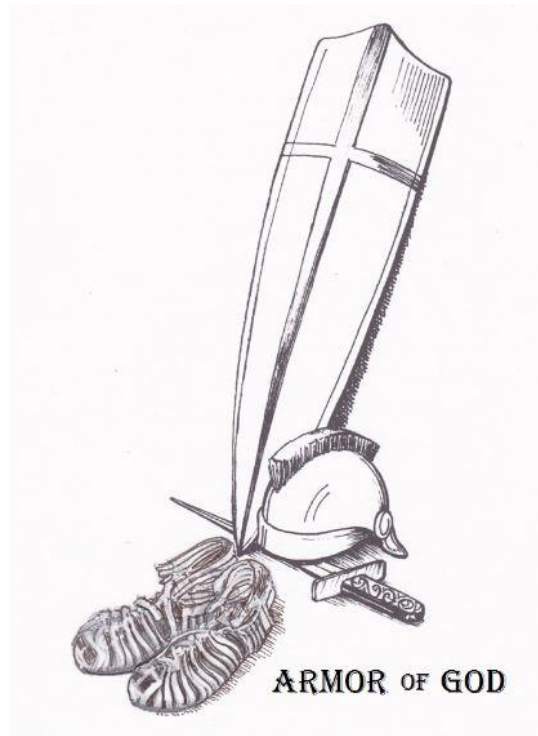
“The Armor of God”

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday and Sunday, August 25–26, 2018

All Services

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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Ephesians 6: 10-20



I've recently started going back and reading my journals from years ago. My journals from my year in Malaysia are particularly interesting. I wrote every day – some days twice – in incredible detail. In one particular entry, I wrote about a conversation I had with the members of my small group. This group was made up of teachers, students and staff members of the seminary, where I taught English – all of whom

were Malaysian, except me. One afternoon, we were talking about times in our life when we struggled or felt alone. Someone brought up the devil and evil forces in the world. Immediately, I clammed up. I felt uncomfortable. Talking about the devil in this way seemed to push beyond my theological boundaries. This talk of the devil felt superstitious.

In my journal, I wrote that I had never really thought about the devil or evil forces much, except to think of the devil as a character – as a man dressed in red with horns and a tail. My small group members associated the devil with evil in the world and saw the devil in their own personal struggles. I was challenged that day to see the world through a different lens – a lens that recognized that God was at work in our world, but also acknowledged where the devil and these evil forces sought to overthrow God and God's kingdom.

Our reading from Ephesians speaks to this fight between God and the devil's evil forces. But, in order to understand what is happening in these 10 verses, we really need to see Ephesians as a whole and understand its context, especially because this reading comes from the end of this book. The book of Ephesians is a letter. Sometimes we forget this fact when we are reading small sections of our Bibles. We forget that real people in real places were involved, living lives far different – or eerily similar – to ours.

This letter has been attributed to Paul and was written to Ephesians, that is Christians living in the city of Ephesus, which is in modern day Turkey. We need to know that the recipients of this letter were a small minority group living in the first century still under Roman rule. They were a people who pledged their allegiance to God, which probably set them at odds with members of their families and their neighbors.

I love how my study bible boils down the message of Ephesians: "Ephesians is filled with praise for God, who is at work in Jesus Christ to put in place a plan for salvation. God destined us (the church) for adoption as children through Jesus Christ. Though we were dead because of sins, God has chosen to save us by grace through faith as a gift." The last three chapters of Ephesians – our reading included – look at how Christ's followers are to share that gift and do God's work in the world.

The author of this letter wants the Ephesians to know that though God has already accomplished this amazing work through Christ, there are still evil forces in the world trying to defy God and God's work. These evil forces don't want the Ephesians to believe in the good news of grace or for the Ephesians to see themselves as God's children. And these evil forces certainly don't want the Ephesians to share this good news. But, the writer of this letter wants them to know that God gives them protection, like armor worn by a Roman soldier.

But, what does this mean for us today? What are these forces of evil that seek to defy God? And how are we to live as followers of Christ in this present time, sharing God's gifts and doing God's work?

These evil forces are anything that seek to divide us, anything that tries to pit us against one another. These forces don't want us to be united. These forces don't want us to show love or kindness, mercy or grace. Evil forces relish in seeing human beings at odds with one another. They love to see us fight. We see this division in politics, in world affairs, and in personal relationships. We even see this division in the church.

These forces are within us as well. These evil forces are those voices inside our minds that tell us we aren't good enough, attractive enough, skinny enough, smart enough, righteous enough. These voices are what Nadia Bolz-Weber calls "demonic pop songs." They play in our minds again and again. Their lyrics tell us lies. Their lyrics try to separate us from God. They try to tell us we aren't created in God's image.

These forces are in our world and they are within us.

When I think about these forces. I think of them like dementors, the creatures from the *Harry Potter* series. Dementors are the black-cloaked "magical creatures who steal hope and happiness out of people." In the words of a character from the series:

"Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth...they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them."

Evil forces in our world do that same thing! They drain us of peace, hope and happiness as their demonic refrains echo in our minds again and again. The devil loves to suck goodness out of the world.

The devil and these evil forces all seek to separate us from God, from each other and from ourselves. How do we stand firm against these forces? Well, Ephesians tells us how: "Take up the whole armor of God... 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. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

Truth. Righteousness. The Gospel. Faith. Salvation. The Spirit. We wear each of these things to protect us.

Imagine a mother or a father getting a small child ready to go out on a cold, winter day. "Do you have your hat? Zip up your coat. Wrap your scarf around your neck. Wear your mittens. Put on your boots." Each of these pieces of winter gear protect us against the elements and so do truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, and the Spirit. These are all gifts from God, given to us from our holy parent.

We receive these things. We put on truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, and salvation at various times in our Christian lives. Baptism. Martin Luther wrote that we are clothed in Christ at baptism. We put on – we wear – Christ's righteousness at baptism. As the water is poured on our heads, salvation is given to us. The mark of the cross is like your helmet of salvation. From that moment forward, we wear this new clothing from God much like Ephesians talks about these pieces of armor.

We receive the gospel when we listen to the word of God, when we hear the good news proclaimed. That's what we are doing right now! Hearing the word of God and carrying it with us as we leave this place, ready to share this good news wherever our feet take us.

We receive faith when we gather around the table. In the body and blood of Christ, God gives us faith and strength. God sustains us in the bread and the wine. The meal prepares us to go out into the world.

We are equipped to stand firm against the devil and the evil forces in our world. God gives us these pieces of armor. God grants us protection. We are not alone. Because...

You, beloved children of God: You wear God's truth. You are protected by God's righteousness. You are shielded by faith. The cross of Christ marked on your forehead is your helmet of salvation. You carry the word of God; the Spirit is with you always. And as you leave this place, you have been called to proclaim this gospel of peace!

Amen.

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