

## God's Armor

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The Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time  
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Psalm 84:5-12  
Ephesians 6:10-20

Text: "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." – Ephesians 6:10-11

Three weeks ago I traveled to Dallas for business. On that August 6<sup>th</sup> Monday in Dallas I was going about my work when I began to hear bits and pieces of news stories about another mass murderer whose name I had not yet heard. So my curiosity took me to Google to find out what was going on. Somehow I missed that, the day before on Sunday, another crazed person acted on his anger and hatred by killing and injuring a bunch of innocent people in a Sikh temple in Wisconsin.

Between not watching any news on Sunday, taking an early morning flight to Dallas and not reading a Monday morning newspaper, I missed out on the newest in what seems like an endless string of "movie show" violence. I say "movie show" violence because it seems like there are always a couple of purposes. One immediate purpose to kill and maim, and a second perhaps more important purpose – get an immediate message of terror out to a broad audience. The media is all too hungry to broadcast all the sordid details. Our leaders immediately give us compassionate speeches and have consoling visits to the "ground zero" site, but rarely is anyone willing to take any sort of action that could really put a dent in this complex problem. Somehow I missed out on this initial wave of news. I'm not sure I am better or worse for not immediately knowing about the latest tragedy.

Look around us... Thousands of years later, we seem to be doing a pretty good job of living in the way of Cain, with brother taking up arms against brother. We find our hearts sliding down the path to fear and xenophobia. Xenophobia, the intense or irrational dislike or fear of others who are not like us. Is it really possible to live in love, as the apostle Paul has been saying to us? Is it really within our grasp to live in unity with one another and the rest of the world? We want safety and security, and will do anything to get it. Why then should we listen to a man writing a letter from a dark and dirty jail?

It's in that context that we take up the message from the Pauline letter to the Ephesians. I say Pauline because there is some evidence that this letter was written by a disciple or disciples of Paul sometime after Paul's more authentic letters. But we don't know that for sure; it may have been written by Paul as a circular letter to many churches while he was in prison in Rome. For the purpose of this morning, however, I'll speak as if it was from Paul's pen. I think Paul might help us to examine our world with new eyes.

The people of Paul's day were certainly familiar with the armor of the Roman soldiers that filled every city in Macedonia. It may be hard for us to get the full impact of what Paul was describing, but let's take a minute to paint this picture in our minds. Imagine if you would a tall, muscular man who has been trained to fight for the empire. He strikes an imposing figure standing before us. Around his waist is tied an item that one translation calls a belt, but which some scholars say is most likely a leather girdle or apron which was used to protect the lower abdomen and groin. Above that was a garment that covered the entire torso. This garment may have been made of solid metal, but was more likely made by sewing together leather strips that had been covered with metal. In any case, this vest contained special reinforcement in the chest area. Both the girdle and the breastplate protect the most vital and vulnerable places of the soldier's body from attack. On the feet of this soldier were most likely boots with nails driven through the soles, allowing him to dig in against an opponent and to stand firm in the face of the oncoming enemy.

Now if we continue to follow Paul's description, this soldier would have a shield, but not one of those small metal ones to defend sword blows. This shield was probably a full length implement made of wood and cloth, and covered with leather. This shield was usually soaked in water before going into battle and would retain its wetness for some time. When an enemy rained down flaming, pitch covered arrows the shield would catch them and quench the flames in the wet leather. On top of the soldier's head was a helmet, made usually of metal, and topped off with some sort of crest, identifying the soldier as one to be feared. Finally, in his hands would be his only offensive weapon, the sword. This sword was probably not the long sword we hear of in the tale of the three musketeers, but a short, squat one probably less than 16 inches in length. It was a close order weapon, requiring one to get close to the enemy in order to do any damage. All of this stuff, this armor, was heavy and bulky. It took a strong man to be able to wear the stuff, not to mention fight a battle in it. So the soldiers of Paul's day were feared, seen as fighting machines not to be messed with.

Now let's change gears a bit to consider Paul's advice. Paul is sending in his army, the church, into battle. In front of us is a Roman warrior, heading in our direction with his sword and shield, and moving to attack us. And so Paul tells us to put on our armor. ...OK, where is this armor? ...OK, here is truth... Let's buckle it in place. ...Alright, let me get my righteousness on. ... And button it all the way up. OK, can you see it? Now let's put on the shoes of peace. Don't forget to put that faith in front of you. ...and grab God's word in your hand. And so we stand there, seemingly as naked as we started out, with only a book in our hand, watching this instrument of war and death come toward us, ever closer.

Come on Paul, you've got to be kidding! Oh we believe in God alright, but a little bit of truth and a dash of peace don't seem to be much comfort against a sharp sword or flaming arrows bent on destroying us. We need protection, real protection. We need protection that only comes from armor and weapons, protection that comes from doing unto others as they have done unto us, protection that comes from becoming like our attackers, using violence to end violence.

And that is where God confronts us, and reassures us, today. God hears our cries two thousand years after Paul wrote his words just as he heard the cries of the early Christians persecuted and under attack by an oppressive Roman government. Paul's words in

Ephesians 6 remind us that true war is not waged on the battle field, with weapons and armor. Rather true war is waged in the heart, in the mind, in the soul. Your battle is not with the external things you see or hear. The battle is not about handguns or roadside bombs. The battle is with rulers, with authorities, with the unseen evil that runs through the world and fills our hearts with terror. For Paul, using the weapons of violence in this battle is as futile as trying to use a hammer to fix a wristwatch. The battle of the mind and soul is never won through external means, through weapons, through armor.

So we look to the tools Paul gives us. We are wrapped in truth, knowing the certainty of what we believe. When we are baptized or confirmed we claim that we know the truth of God's love, the truth about Jesus' sacrifice, the truth about our own inadequacy. But as we are confronted by the evil of what appear to be our enemies, our sense of certainty becomes tarnished, damaged, and we wonder if the whole house of cards that we call our faith is about to fall. But, the belt of truth holds together our confidence about who God is and what God promises, and therefore, protects our spirit from permanent damage.

We are also covered with righteousness. Righteousness, for Paul, is not about living out a list of "do's" and "don'ts." No, righteousness is about living a life that is consistent with the truth we wrap around us. Righteousness is about living a life like Jesus instructed Peter to do in the Gospel of John. "Feed my lambs." "Take care of my sheep." "Feed my sheep."

Then we have the gospel of peace on our feet. Paul seems less concerned about our putting on peace, than our sharing it. To share "shalom," is not simply to call for the absence of war. Rather, to offer shalom for someone is to wish for their peace of mind, for their contentment, for their fullness of life. To offer this peace is not passive. No, it involves actively working for the well-being of others, so that God's grace is revealed to them just as it has been revealed to us.

Faith is the shield that goes before us, and salvation the helmet that covers us, protecting us from the fiery arrows that are thrown our way. It is faith that keeps us from falling apart in the midst of tragedy. It is faith that keeps the flames of hatred and oppression from spreading. It is faith that calls us to light a candle in the dark, to hold the hand of another, to do all the things that we do to proclaim that evil does not have any power over us. And salvation clothes us in grace far beyond what we may feel at a given moment, a grace given by the one who died forgiving us.

When we put on the full armor of God, our hearts and are souls and our minds are freed from the power of evil and terror that fills our world today. Jesus showed us this. Always, always remember that. Amen.