

THE ARMOUR OF GOD

Ephesians 6:10-17

I have a confession to make. I am afraid of the dark. I have been afraid of the dark my entire life. Even in my childhood home, Mom, Pop and all my siblings present, my imagination would run away from me and I was sure the boogey man was going to get me in the night. Of course, it did not help that my older brother George told me there were bears living in our attic that would get me if I ever went up there alone! Thanks, George. Each night I hated to turn out the light that is until I came up with a solution. First of all, I would get a firm hold on Lamby. Why I ever thought she (of course Lamby is a 'she') would protect me is anybody's guess, but there you have it. I also had "glow in the dark" rosary beads. I draped my rosary over the lamp while reading and by the time I turned off the light, the rosary beads gave off a comforting glow. I would then fall asleep saying the Hail Mary's, Glory Be to the Father, and Our Father until my own droning voice put me to sleep.

I did not get any braver as I aged. When Matthew, Vern and I moved to Massachusetts in 1989, Matt and I stayed behind an additional 6 weeks, so he could finish up his final skiing season at the mountain, and I could wrap up my alterations business. We were staying with my Papa and stepmother, Jan who were supposed to be present in their home while we were there. What really happened is Papa developed complications with his cataract surgery in a hospital in Boston and Matt and I were left to fend for ourselves. Staying in a strange house, my childhood fears came back in full force. For the next six weeks, the only way I was able to fall asleep was to say Psalm 4:8 over and over: *In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.* While firmly gripped in my right hand was the sharpest pair of scissors I owned!

This morning we are on our final Lectionary lesson from Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. Ephesians is the most formal of all Paul's letters to the early church. The language is without affection and is rather straightforward. Church Scholars point to Ephesians as a book which hits on a wide range of moral and ethical behaviors, designed to ensure that believers are living up to our heavenly calling. Or to put it more plainly, if you are talking the talk, are you walking the walk? It seems a little curious then that chapter opens with the following words: *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.* (Ephesians 6:10-11 NIV). Theologian N.T. Wright shares, *for some reason, almost whenever I write about passages like this one, dealing with spiritual warfare, I run into problems. One time a workman outside the house drove a nail through a main electricity cable and I lost half an hour's writing. Sometimes domestic crises suddenly arise and distract me.* When I was in seminary, without fail, the night before a paper was due, I would have problems with my laptop – it would freeze up or even lose what I had completed. This seemed too weird to me until I heard other horror stories from my classmates of the troubles they had writing their theology papers! With tongue in cheek we talked about doing an exorcism on our laptops!

Spiritual warfare, Pastor Tizzy? Sounds a little like hocus pocus to me. Seriously...spiritual warfare is real, and it is subtle, so subtle that what starts out as seemingly innocuous behavior, ends up with people compromising their faith. The most ready example I can think of which has greatly affected Sunday morning church attendance, is the practice of scheduling youth sports events for Sunday morning. Youth sports are a good thing, and good supportive parents will go out of their way to

support their child who signs up for softball, etc. Parents and other adults generously give of their time to coach and chauffeur children to games. Getting a child involved in sports is character forming: a child learns about teamwork and good sportsmanship. They are being physically active and not glued to the TV or Smartphones. And so, it starts, after a time, what was relegated to weekday afternoons, evenings and Saturday's spilled over into Sunday afternoons, then late Sunday mornings. Listen to what Paul has to say about this: *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* (Ephesians 6:12 NIV) The powers of this dark world have a leader - call this individual what you may: The Adversary, Satan, Evil, and The Devil – they are one and the same person. The number one characteristic of the Devil is to confuse and lead astray all of God's children. The Devil is not going to appear to us with horns and a pitchfork; or be covered in graphic tattoos with body piercings galore...no the devil can look as loving and innocent as the person sitting beside you in the pew. In his *Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis says this: *Readers are advised to remember that the devil is a liar.*

Have you ever discussed Spiritual warfare as a matter of dinner conversation; while taking a drive; or even as a congregation? Most churches do not because it might make us uncomfortable, or it is not popular to bring up the factor of evil in church. We should only talk of love and kindness. Again from C.S. Lewis – *The general public prefers either to ignore the forces of evil altogether – to pretend they don't exist. Or worse, people take an unhealthy interest in the demonic which is just as bad or worse.* Flirting with the demonic opens all kinds of footholds for evil to enter into a person's life.

And look, Paul is not the only one to speak of the whiles of the devil. There are, at least, a total of 23 other references to the devil in the New Testament. The one that supports the quote from C.S. Lewis comes from the Gospel of John 8:44, *You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.* Paul does not only talk about spiritual warfare, Paul gives us a sober, realistic assessment both of the struggle we are engaged in and of the weapons at our disposal.

The weapons Paul speaks of are mainly defensive equipping us to withstand attack and still be standing up at the end of the day. The belt, the breastplate, the shoes the shield and the helmet are all to enable us to remain safe under attack. Only the sword has the potential to do harm.

First, we have the belt of truth. The primary thing about the Christian message is that it is true. It isn't true because it works; it works because it is true. Never give up on the sheer truth of the gospel. Unlike humankind, God's truth is truth. Like our clothing the belt holds everything else together and in place.

Second, we have the breastplate of righteousness. This is not to be confused with the self-righteousness so many 'religious' people like to hide behind. This righteousness is that you and I have been made right before God through Jesus Christ. We have been justified through the blood of Jesus. And indeed, in spiritual warfare, the forces of evil quickly retreat whenever a Christian calls upon the blood of Jesus. So, in that manner it is like a breastplate that protects the tenderest parts of our bodies.

Third, our shoes take our feet wherever God directs to bring to the world the gospel of peace. The message is peace with God and peace between humankind. The enemy will do all he can to knock you off your feet. Holding fast to this message of peace will make you ready like good shoes or boots to stay upright.

Fourth, always, always carry the shield of faith – which is none other than belief in Jesus Christ as your risen Lord and Savior. Utter loyalty to Jesus will protect you when the enemy hurls flaming arrows at you. These arrows may have names like doubt or despair; of trying circumstances; of intense temptation. Then there is personal tragedy; but there is also arrogance and pride which can drive a wedge between us and Christ.

Fifth, the helmet of salvation. I like to think of this one as wearing the team logo. Wearing the helmet identifies you are belonging to the family of God. You have been already rescued and just like hard hats, bicycle helmets, sports helmets protect you from injury. Don't leave home without it!

Sixth, we come to the sword of the spirit which is the only symbol that can actually cause harm. But wait, the sword is the word of God, and Hebrews 4:12 tells us that *What God has said isn't only alive and active! It is sharper than any double-edged sword. His word can cut through our spirits and souls and through our joints and marrow, until it discovers the desires and thoughts of our hearts.* The word of God is powerful. This is why all those years ago I repeated, *In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.* Praying scripture is the most powerful way to pray. There have been many times I have prayed the Psalms inserting the name of the person for whom I am praying. Psalm 91 is the perfect Psalm to pray in this manner – Vern, *Live under the protection of God Most High and stay in the shadow of God All-Powerful. Then, Vern, you will say to the Lord, "You are my fortress, my place of safety; you are my God, and I trust you." Vern, The Lord will keep you safe from secret traps and deadly diseases. He will spread his wings over you and keep you secure. His faithfulness is like a shield or a city wall.*

Pray for your spouse, children and grandchildren in this manner. Of all the protection of the full amour of God this is indeed the most powerful. There is no better way to cover them with divine protection.

There is no "So What?" this morning – spiritual warfare is too real and pervasive for me to even entertain the idea that you would not take this to heart.

In closing, listen to these words from the late Henri Nouwen. They are a perfect example of spiritual warfare and the power of the sword of the spirit: *"Many voices ask for our attention. There is a voice that says, 'Prove that you are a good person.' Another voice says, 'You'd better be ashamed of yourself.' There also is a voice that says, 'Nobody really cares about you,' and one that says, 'Be sure to become successful, popular, and powerful.' But underneath all these often very noisy voices is a still, small voice that says, 'You are my Beloved, my favor rests on you.' That's the voice we need most of all to hear. To hear that voice, however, requires special effort; it requires solitude, silence, and a strong determination to listen. That's what prayer is. It is listening to the voice that calls us 'my Beloved'."*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.