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The Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity: Put on the Armour of God Ephesians 6:10-20

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St. Paul knew what the trials and tribulations of persecution look like—and not just what they looked like. He knew what it smells like and tastes like, what it sounds like and what it feels like. He had been surrounded by the angry, yelling mobs ready to tear him limb from limb. He'd seen jail cell after jail cell, smelled the mould and the damp, and had eaten the rough bread and drank the stale water and smelled the filth of the prisoners. He bore the marks of persecution on his body. His back was criss-crossed with dozens upon dozens of scars that had once been the deep-cutting lashes of whips. More than once he'd been beaten to within an inch of his life. They were the marks of Jesus, he told people. Jesus had told his disciples that they must take up their crosses and follow him. When he said that, they would have been confused. But then Jesus was nailed to a cross and eventually the enemies of that cross came for them, first their fellow Jews and then the pagan Greek and Romans. All of them, except for John, were eventually hunted down and martyred for the sake of Jesus and the good news that he had died, that he had risen, and that he is the world's true Lord.

Paul wrote today's Epistle, Ephesians 6:10-20, while he was imprisoned in Rome, probably about A.D. 62, waiting to plead his case before the Emperor Nero. A few years later, Nero lashed out at the church in Rome in one of the most violent and well-known persecutions in history. Paul, himself, was martyred in that persecution, probably beheaded. But when he

wrote his letters from prison, he was hopeful. He would plead his case before the Emperor and he would be set free—which it seems probably did happen—and maybe he would set sail for Spain, the end of the world, to proclaim the good news about Jesus there. Paul was hopeful, because he believed that good news. When Jesus was raised from the dead, God's new creation was unleashed into the world. Paul knew that the church and the gospel, empowered by the Holy Spirit, would do their work and transform creation. But Paul also knew—because it had already happened to him—he knew that these little communities of Christians scattered across the empire would face the sorts of trials and tribulations and persecution that he had. Things would get worse before they got better. And each one of those Christians, Paul knew, before too long would have to face those words of Jesus: Take up your cross and follow me. Paul knew how hard it was. He had seen many already who, when the pressure was on, compromised the gospel, compromised their faith, compromised their Lord—in one way or another they compromised their witness. Instead of taking up their crosses, they ran away. Paul knew that God does not give his Spirit or sent out his word in vain, so he knew that the church would eventually accomplish the mission God has given her, but he also knew that for many there was a real danger of apostasy. And so he wrote to churches, like the one in Ephesus, from his prison cell in Rome and he encouraged and exhorted them to stand firm. To follow Jesus is to suffer, but it is to suffer with the hope of glory, the hope of resurrection, the hope of new creation—a sure and certain hope!—before us.

That's the context of our Epistle today about the armour of God and it's important. This is a familiar passage. And because of that and because it's been so many centuries since Western Christians have faced the sorts of tribulation that those early saints faced, we've sort of over-

spiritualised the whole thing. Brothers and Sisters, for Paul this was imminently practical. Opposition, persecution, and even death were coming for those early believers and putting on this armour of God was how they were going to confront it, stand firm, and make their witness for Jesus and his kingdom.

So here at the end of his letter to Ephesus, after he's given them five plus chapters of exhortation and advice as to how to live out the gospel, he brings it to a conclusion telling them how they're going to manage being faithful. He writes in verse 10:

Finally, by strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his might.

He's given them a lot of things to do in light of the coming troubles. They've got to be wondering how they're going to do it all. And I expect some of them were invigorated by the challenge and ready to take it on, but they were going to do it in their own strength. So Paul is clear: Don't be strong in *you*. Be strong in the Lord. Paul knew this first hand after everything he'd been through. You can't be faithful to Jesus for the long haul, let alone take up your cross in those times of tribulation, *you* can't do it. You don't have the strength or the faith or the perseverance or whatever it will take to do it. But, Brothers and Sisters, this is why the Lord has poured his own Spirit into you in your baptism. You renounced the world, the flesh, and the devil, and then God poured his Spirit into you so that you could—so that you can. Be strong in his might. But how do you do that? Paul goes on:

Put on the whole armour of God. Then you'll be able to stand firm against the devil's schemes.

Put on the armour of God. But before we get into that, Paul stresses that the devil was scheming against them. Just as the devil had schemed to inspire that crowd of people to demand Pilate crucify Jesus, the devil was scheming

against the church. Paul had a personal sense of both ends of that scheming. He knew what it was to be on the receiving end, but remember that Paul had been one of the chief persecutors of the church in the days after Pentecost. He was there when Stephen was stoned by the Jewish mob. When he had his encounter with the risen Jesus, he was on his way to Damascus to round up Christians so that they could be tried before the Jewish authorities. And that was something he had a reputation for. There was a reason the Christians were afraid when Ananias brought Paul to meet them. So, I think, Paul also knew first hand that demonic influence that inspired the unbelieving Jews and the pagan Greeks to lash out at the followers of Jesus and that kept them shrouded in unbelief and darkness. He knew. It had taken a face-to-face encounter with Jesus to break him out of that influence and he also knew first-hand that believers could only withstand the onslaught of that demonic power in the might of God. The power of the flesh, as he puts it, won't do. He goes on in verse 12:

The warfare we're engaged in, you see, isn't against flesh and blood. It's against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers that rule the world in this dark time, against the wicked spiritual elements in the heavenly places.

If you were fighting flesh and blood, you could do this on your own. But you're not. We need to remember this, because it's the flesh and blood that we see. People oppose us and sometimes that's all we think about is the people. But Paul reminds us that the people aren't so much the problem. It's that old lie, inspired by the serpent in the beginning, the lie that we can be gods, that we can do our own thing, shape our own destiny, remake the world in our image and according to our desires. It's that demonic lie that inspires the hatred of the gospel and the hostility towards

everyone who lives it and proclaims it, because the gospel exposes the lie.

For this reason, writes Paul, you must take up the whole armour of God, so that when evil grabs the moment, you'll be able to hold your ground, do what needs doing, and still be on your feet when it's over. So stand firm! Put the belt of truth around your waist.

The world is lost in darkness because of a lie. The world hates Jesus, hates the gospel, and is coming after us because of a lie. If you're going to stand firm against a demonic lie, the first thing you need to put on is the truth. Paul has in mind the armour a centurion would have worn. Most of that armour was attached to or was somehow supported by his belt or girdle and just so with the armour of God. It starts with the truth. And the truth is that God sent his son, Jesus, to deliver us from the lie, to forgive us for our rebellion, and to set us—and eventually his whole creation—to rights. The truth is in the words of the creed we confess every week when we say:

I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

That's the truth, Friends. Never forget it. Belt it around your waist. Everything else depends on it.

Then Paul writes:

Put on justice (or righteousness) as your breastplate.

The breastplate covers your vitals from frontal attack. Paul compares it to justice or righteousness. When the lie comes at you, Brothers and Sisters, remember that God is the great judge and that his mission is to set this world right. That great work began when he raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus is the Messiah, but the people believed the lie and rejected him. The people shouted the lie at the top of the lungs, declaring him a false messiah and demanding his crucifixion. But when he raised Jesus from the dead, God vindicated his claim to be the Messiah. Jesus was justified that day and declared by the judge to be in the right. And the truth is that because we have declared our allegiance to Jesus and have been united with him in our baptism, God has justified us and declared us to be in the right, too.

The world will come after us and try to shout us down, will try to cancel us, will say that we're dumb or gullible for believing the gospel. The world will call us narrow-minded or hateful or bigoted on account of Jesus and the gospel. The world will even go so far as to try to tell us who Jesus really is and what his message really was and that we've got it all wrong—just like the scribes and Pharisees condemned Jesus and tried to tell him what the real Messiah was supposed to be like. They'll confront us and try to undermine the truth of the gospel and the truth of God's word, making us think we've been deceived. And when that fails, the world will mock us, shun us, cancel us—and in some times and places imprison and even kill us. Brothers and Sisters, when that happens, remember that God, on account of Jesus, has declared us to be in the right. He has justly vindicated us against the accusations of the enemy. God's justice is our breastplate. Remember that when you're attacked by the great lie. If you

are in Jesus the Messiah, you stand already vindicated in him—found by the great judge to be the right.

Then, as shoes for your feet, ready for battle, put on the gospel of peace.

This goes back to Chapter 2, verses 11-22, where Paul writes that Jesus the Messiah is, himself, our peace. What Paul's getting at there is our unity in Jesus with each other and our reconciliation with God. One of the common tactics of battle is to divide and conquer. Paul's concern as he sat there in prison and heard reports of what was happening in the churches, his concern was for their unity. The first Christians were Jews, but as the gospel went out to the gentiles, many of them believed, too. And pretty soon there was friction. As we saw in our Epistle from Galatians a few weeks ago, Jewish believers were being hassled by other Jews who heard that Jews and gentiles were mixing in these churches in Greece and Rome. That prompted those Jewish believers to send out "missionaries" to Judaize those gentile believers—to make them respectable to unbelieving Jews. In Rome, the Jews had been expelled in the early 50s, and then when they were allowed back, there was division in the churches between them and the gentile believers. And so, back in Chapter 2, Paul says, "Look, you who are uncircumcised were once far off, had no hope, and were far from God, but in Jesus the Messiah you have been brought near by his blood. He is our peace and he's made us both—Jew and gentile—he's made us one and by his broken flesh, has torn down the wall of hostility that was once between us...He's created in himself one new man where there were once two, so making peace, and through his cross, reconciling us all to God in one body...He preached peace to you who were far off and to those who were near and now through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. That means you are no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow

citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus the Messiah himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure grows into a holy temple in the Lord."

Notice how Paul says that it's by virtue of our being in Jesus, our being united with him, that we are one. We don't make Christian unity; Jesus does. Our job is to remember what Jesus has done for us, guard it, live it, and cultivate it—to be a united front against the enemy and his great lie. The Jew-gentile divide isn't the great problem now that it was in Paul's day, but there are plenty of other ways that Christians and churches fail to live out the unity we have in Jesus. Brothers and Sisters, we who are in Jesus the Messiah, who believe and proclaim the truth, who have been justified on his account, *we are one*. As we stand firm against the enemy, this truth is the shoes on our feet. Forget to put that unity on, let ourselves be divided, and when push comes to shove, you'll have no traction to stand firm for Jesus.

Now, verse 16:

With it all, take up the shield of faith, with which you'll be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

The enemy will throw his great lie at you like flaming arrows, trying to get you to doubt. Brothers and Sisters, remember that the Spirit has given you the gift of faith. Take it up. Use it. It will quench those flaming arrows as the lie is thrown at you.

I've been listening to a preacher for the last few weeks who routinely plays up the grey areas, who spends a lot of time blurring lines that should be clear, and who talks about doubt as if it's the same thing as humility. He's undermining the church from within. Now, in our faith, there are some legitimate grey areas and there are

some legitimately blurry lines, but one of the overwhelmingly central themes of the gospel is certainty. The evangelists and the apostles stress the reliability of their eyewitness accounts as proof of the gospel's truth. Paul never coddles doubt. Instead, he points to the truth of the gospel and the absolute faithfulness of God witnessed through the scriptures and ultimately at the cross of Jesus. Brothers and Sisters, steep yourselves in those scriptures, meditate on the cross, and take up the gift of faith the Spirit has given you. It will defend you against the lies of the enemy.

Next, Paul writes, **Take the helmet of salvation.**

Surround your head—your mind—with the sure and certain knowledge that in Jesus you belong to the family of the Messiah and that when you passed through the waters of baptism, he delivered you, he saved you from the enemy—from sin, from death, and from the devil, just as he saved Israel from Pharaoh when he took his people through the Red Sea. Dear Friends, the lie has no power over those who have been delivered from its master. Keep that central truth in your mind.

And, finally, **Take the sword of the spirit, which is God's word.**

The other pieces of armour defend us from the enemy's great lie, but this is our one offensive weapon. There's something to that. How often do we charge into battle for Jesus wielding other things? We charge out there wielding political clout or good works—and that's not to say that there isn't a place for those things—but, Brothers and Sisters, the thing that will ultimately defeat the enemy and transform this world is this sword of the spirit, what Paul calls the word of God. That and that alone. Everything else follows that, is derivative of that, is in some way secondary to that. But what does Paul mean? We often talk about the whole Bible as the word of God, but Paul has something narrower

in mind here, which he's already defined in 5:26, where he writes about the word as that by which Jesus has made us clean. Specifically, what Paul is talking about is the gospel: the good news about Jesus, crucified, risen, ascended, and Lord. John gives us a vivid picture of this in Revelation, Jesus riding out with the sword of his mouth and his people following behind, charging into the darkness of the world with the light of the gospel until the whole world has been transformed and brought into the light. It's an amazing thing. The work that Jesus began at the cross, continues as his people go out into the world to proclaim who he is and what he has done, to overcome the enemy's great lie with the truth. It's huge and it seems impossible that we can do it—and of course, no one generation of Christians will ever do it all at once—but that's precisely the mission that Jesus has given us. He doesn't expect us to do it on our own power or authority. We declare *his* word and we do it in the power of *his* Spirit and, Brothers and Sisters, that's the only way we will ever do it. But we know that his word does not return void and we know that he did not send his Spirit in vain, so we know that he will cause our work, done in faithfulness, to bear fruit, even if we don't always see it.

And then, finally, knowing how hard it is to do this—and knowing that the enemy and lie were going to drop on the churches like a ton of bricks in the not very distant future—Paul reminds them in verse 18:

Pray on every occasion in the Spirit, with every type of prayer and intercession. You'll need to keep awake and alert for this, with all perseverance and intercession for all God's holy ones.

And he—the one writing to them to stay strong in the Lord, he knows the struggle he faces and so he also asks:

And also for me! Pray that God will give me his words to speak when I

open my mouth, so that I can make known, loud and clear, the truth of the gospel. That's why I'm chained-up as an ambassador. Pray that I may announce boldly; that's what I'm duty-bound to do.

Brothers and Sisters, pray. As we face the enemy, pray for faith and pray for wisdom, pray for understanding and pray for the words to say. Steep yourselves in the scriptures and in the great story of God and his people and of Jesus and the cross and the empty tomb and then pray for his church and pray for the wisdom and the words and the courage to tell the story and to proclaim that Jesus is Lord. Pray, pray, pray and when you think you've prayed enough, pray, pray, pray some more, because the more you pray the more you entrust yourself and your vocation to God. The more you pray, the less you will rely on yourself and the more you will rely on the word and the Spirit to do their work.

Again, as I said earlier, I think we've had a tendency—because we've been out of the crucible of tribulation for so long—to overly spiritualise this passage. Paul had a real attack by the enemy in mind. It was an attack that would seriously challenge the fledgling churches and in which many would even find themselves literally taking up their crosses as the followed Jesus. We're not in that place and I doubt we in North America will face anything nearly that bad in the foreseeable future, but things are getting worse and they will get worse still. It's vital that we put on the armour of God, it's vital that we take up the sword of the spirit, the word, the gospel, and it's vital that we be a people of prayer, because that's the only way through—it's the only way to survive and it's the only way we will ever advance the kingdom. Brothers and Sisters, gospel light awaits us on the other side of the darkness. So come to the Lord's Table this morning, eat the bread and drink the wine, and remember that Jesus has died and that he has risen,

remember that you belong to him, that in him we belong to each other, and be strengthened in faith as we remember his sure and certain promises to us. Be strengthened, not with your own power, but with the strength of his might that you might stand firm.

Let's pray: Merciful Lord, grant to your faithful people pardon and peace; that we may be cleansed from all our sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; strengthen us with faith as we recall what you have done for us in Jesus, your son, and send us out into the world in faith, equipped to stand firm against the enemy. Through Jesus our Lord we pray. *Amen.*