



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity Ephesians 6:10-20 Fr. William Klock

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If you haven't noticed, we have a mouse problem. Usually the mice stay to the attic or the crawlspace, but for some reason, this year, they've decided to go everywhere. For the last six weeks I've been plugging holes and setting traps and experimenting with bait: everything from peanut butter to dog treats to Veronica and Meredith's maple fudge. All to no avail. They don't touch the traps, but they poop right next to them as if to say, "Do you really think we're that stupid?" And Friday, Friday was the last straw. The last while has seemed like a steady stream of setbacks and disappointments. This week I was working on my book on preaching while sending feedback to a couple of guys I've been advising on preaching. I've been really struggling with that book and this week, chatting with these two guys, I finally kind of identified the obstacle I've been running up against and I don't really know how to get around it, and that's left me frustrated and discouraged. And the City of Courtenay. They won't clear the leaves in their little "conservation" area anymore, so I cleared the sidewalks, but then Thursday's storm blew the leaves back even deeper, so Friday morning I was using a snow shovel to move them out as far away as I could from the church so the wind wouldn't blow them back and in the process I strained something in my leg. And then the news coming out daily this week from ACNA and about bishops not doing what bishops are supposed to do and bishops allegedly doing things that bishops aren't supposed to do. I was really,

really discouraged on Friday. I'm rarely tempted to give up, but Friday I was close. And then I heard a noise, and I turned and saw a mouse dart across the room and into the storage cubicle in the Sunday School. So I got up to see where the mouse went. I didn't find it, but I did find the nest. In the seasonal banners. It was gross. The mice had peed and pooped and chewed holes in them. And that was it. Stick a fork in me. I'm done. I packed up my things and went home. I tried the Elijah therapy. I had a snack and a nap. It didn't really work.

I came back yesterday morning to clean up the mouse mess. I checked the traps first. I wanted revenge. But alas—nothing—as usual. So I started sweeping and mopping and vacuuming and while I was doing that I was praying—mostly for the death of the mice. But somewhere between the mopping and the vacuuming it hit me. Of all the things wrong with the world and wrong with the church, it wasn't the mice. People sin, bishops sin, I sin—but not the mice. The mice, as annoying as they are, the mice are doing exactly what God created them to do. They're upstairs peeing and pooping and chewing on the banners, because that's what God made them to do and in doing it they give him glory. And while I was discouraged and tempted to just give up, they were happily doing their thing, not caring at all that I'm out to get them—laughing their little mouse laughs at me as they poop right next to my traps. Looking for a new place to build a nest after I kicked them out of the last one. And as I vacuumed up their poop St. Paul's words from our Epistle kept running around my head like a mouse on a wheel: Stand firm!

I—we—need to be like the mice. We need to be what Jesus has made us to be and in that we will give God glory. And, of course, in doing that, we'll catch the attention of the enemy, who will do his best to oppose us, to discourage us, to persuade us to throw in the towel. Our Epistle today is from Ephesians 6—just about at the

end of the letter. The first part of the letter is about who we are—or, better, who Jesus has made us through his death and resurrection. In Chapter 2 Paul writes that if we belong to the Messiah—if we have put our faith, our trust, our allegiance in him—then we are *already* "seated with him in the heavenly places". If by faith we are in the Messiah, then that's who we are: we're part of God's new creation, seated with our king in glory. But of course, this is one of those "already, but not yet" things. It's begun, but it's not yet finished. Think about it. When he rose from death, Jesus won the decisive battle over sin and death. But that doesn't mean the war is over. Sin and death, the principalities and powers of the old evil age still, nevertheless, continue to fight on even though they've already lost. It won't be over until the gospel and the Spirit have gone out to bring God's new creation to the ends of the earth—until the knowledge of his glory covers the earth as the waters cover the sea. And here's the point that Paul is trying to make here at the end of Ephesians: Because we've been united with Jesus the Messiah, because what's true of him is true of us, because we are seated with him in the heavenlies, that means that we've been recruited to take part in this great messianic battle to carry the gospel and God's glory to the ends of the earth—to proclaim the victory Jesus won on the cross to the people who haven't yet heard that good news, who haven't yet heard that he's the world's true lord.

And if we do this, we will face opposition. That's why, when you make it clear for example, that your church isn't in the business of playing musical chairs with other churches, but about going out to proclaim and live the gospel to bring people to Jesus, the devils will fight you. That's why, when you make it clear that you're not going to compromise with the philosophies, with the politics, with the systems of the world, the devils will fight you. That's why, when you make it clear that you're going to live out new creation and

make the glory of God known here and now, the devils will fight you. They will fight you. They will throw hurdles in your path. They will go for the weakest link and they will cause your leaders to stumble and fall. They will do whatever they can to discourage you and tempt you to throw in the towel.

And so Paul writes to the Ephesian Christians and he says, “The one thing left to say is this: Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.” Don’t be strong in yourself. That won’t cut it. Be strong in the Lord, because he’s the one who has won the victory. “Put on God’s complete armour,” he says. “Then you’ll be able to stand firm against the devil’s schemes.” And, to be clear, it’s the *devil’s* schemes. “The warfare we’re engaged in, you see, isn’t against flesh and blood. It’s against the principalities, against the powers, against the cosmic powers that rule the world in this dark age, against the wicked spiritual elements in the heavenly places.”

I expect this took some time to sink in with Paul’s original audience—especially his fellow Judeans. It’s not that they didn’t believe there are unseen forces in the world. That’s a problem unique to people today with all of our post-enlightenment materialistic thinking. If we can’t see it, it doesn’t exist. People in the First Century knew better than us. They knew there are spiritual powers we can’t see. The issue is that when we think of enemies, we almost always think of *people*. It’s the guy on the city council who wants to take away the tax exempt status of churches. It’s the people in the wrong political party. It’s the people in that foreign country that hate us. It’s the Communists or it’s the Muslims or the alphabet people or the pronouns people. Paul’s people thought the same way. Judeans thought it was the pagans. Their enemies were the Greeks who tried to stamp out their way of life back in the Second Century B.C. It was the

Romans who presently ruled them and whose grip was getting tighter and tighter. Paul knew that as persecution came to the churches at the hands of unbelieving Jews and pagan Greeks and Romans Christians would be tempted to start thinking the same way about them.

And Paul’s wanting them to understand here that none of those people is the real enemy. Maybe they once were, but when Jesus died on the cross and rose again, he redefined the battle. Jesus didn’t go to the cross to defeat the Greeks or the Romans or the Communists or the Muslims. He went to the cross to defeat sin and death and the powers of evil—those powers that, since the serpent tempted Eve, have infiltrated God’s good creation and corrupted it, that have caused us to worship idols instead of God, that have caused us to forsake our vocation as the stewards of his creation and priests of his temple, that have caused us to turn on each other instead of loving each other as God loves us. Jesus came like a new Adam to defeat not us, but the powers of evil, and in the process to forgive us for our rebellion and treason and to restore us to our old vocation, to do the job he created us for in the first place. That’s what it means to bear his image.

And Paul knew that this meant Jesus has called us to fight at his side. Not to fight the Greeks or the Romans or the Communists or the Muslims, but to fight the powers of evil, the principalities and powers and spiritual forces that have infiltrated creation and brought darkness where there should be light. Again, at the cross he won the decisive victory, now he calls us into his gospel army to proclaim that good news. To announce to the world that Jesus is Lord, that there is forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God through him if we will only come in faith and give him our allegiance. The Greeks and the Romans, the Communists and the Muslims aren’t the enemy. It’s the dark powers behind them. And never

forget that those dark powers were once working in us, too. And they’re often much closer to home—even doing their work of corruption in our own house—if you’ve followed the ACNA news the past couple of weeks. But the good news is that Jesus can deliver those people, just as he delivered us.

This, by the way, is why Jesus hasn’t just done the war all at once. Because God is patient, loving, and gracious he’s chosen to fight this war over the long term, giving the whole world the opportunity to hear and respond to the good news about Jesus. Giving time for the gospel and the Spirit to infiltrate the systems and powers and people of this old evil age to undo what sin and death have done.

So, Paul writes, stand firm and be prepared to fight—the real enemy. And for that he says we need to take up the whole armour of God. That’s verse 13. And this is really telling. If you were paying attention when we read the Old Testament lesson this morning—the one from Isaiah 59—what Paul says here should sound familiar. Through Isaiah the Lord promised that he would send a redeemer to set the world to rights. Our Old Testament lesson is a promise of the coming Messiah, of Jesus. Here’s what we read: “The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. *He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.* According to their deeds, so will he repay, wrath to his adversaries, repayment to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render repayment... And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression,’ declares the Lord.”

Jesus was the first one to put on this armour and now, because we're united with him, because he's made us part of his new creation, and because he's called us to enter the battle and to stand firm against the darkness, he shares his armour with us—otherwise we wouldn't be able to stand at all. And here's the armour as Paul describes it in Ephesians, starting again at 6:13: "For this reason you must take up the whole armour of God. Then, when wickedness grabs the moment, you'll be able to withstand, to do what needs to be done, and still be on your feet when it's over. So stand firm! Put the belt of truth around your waist; put on justice/righteousness as your breastplate; for shoes on your feet, ready for battle, take the good news of peace. With it all take the shield of faith; if you've got that, you'll be able to quench the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word."

It starts with truth. A Roman soldier's belt or girdle was sort of the thing that everything else attached to or hung from. Put on truth as your belt. Everything else depends on that. In Isaiah's vision the Messiah was to come to set this broken world to rights and that begins with the truth. The reason the world is in the mess it's in is because we believed the serpent's lie—that we could be like God. Brother and Sisters, the truth is that that's idolatry. Every other sin cascades from that. The great lie that permeates the world is that we can do and be whatever we want. That we can make our own reality and define goodness for ourselves. But Jesus has come to remind us of the truth—the truth of the original creation and the truth of God's new creation. And so before we go to battle evil, we've got to tie that truth around us. The gospel isn't about our feelings; it's not what we make it; it's not about what we think might offend or not offend people; it's about the truth, the reality of God's goodness and his good

creation and his purpose to set it and us to rights revealed in the good news about Jesus. Tie that on and the rest follows naturally.

Second, as a breastplate, put on God's justice or righteousness—remember in Greek they're the same word. It's a reminder that at the heart of the gospel is God's plan to set this broken world to rights—to undo everything that's wrong, to undo all the sad things, to wipe away all the tears—ultimately and eventually to wipe every last bit of evil and sin and darkness from creation and even death itself. And it's a reminder that when God raised Jesus from death, he overturned the world's false verdict against him and declared him to be in the right—and that if we are united with him, then we share in that verdict, in his vindication.

And then for our shoes: peace. "How beautiful are the feet of the one who announces peace...who says to Zion, Your God reigns." This is the place where Paul changes that Old Testament image from Isaiah. Instead of vengeance, he calls us to put on peace. The Jews wanted vengeance on their enemies, but Paul's reminding us that the Messiah, through his death, has reconciled us to God. He's given us peace. And that peace isn't just for us; it's for everyone. And it's on our feet. We stand on it. The enemy will try to knock us down by making us think we're in this for vengeance—that we need to go after the Greeks or the Romans or the Communists or the Muslims, but if we stand on peace, on reconciliation with God, we will stand firm and remember that our fight is not with flesh and blood, but with the devil.

The fourth bit of armour is the shield of faith. In the ancient world an enemy might shoot flaming arrows at you, so you soaked your wooden shield in water. We soak our shield in faith. That means in the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah and in our own responding faith—remembering that he's won the victory and trusting that

he will empower us to stand firm in this gospel battle and win in the end. And that goes with the helmet of salvation—like a gospel thinking cap, it reminds us Jesus has rescued the captives. You and I no longer belong to sin and death, but to the Messiah. It reminds us, too, why we're waging this battle: to free the men and women still captive, still slaves to sin and death.

So far this armour is all for defence. The Christian has only one offensive weapon and that should remind us about the nature of this battle. It's not against flesh and blood, but against the unseen forces of evil that infiltrate the systems and institutions of the world. Our sword, the weapon by which we advance the kingdom of God is the *word*. In Isaiah 11:4 the Messiah smites the earth with the rod of his mouth and slays the wicked with the breath of his lips. It's a wonderful illustration of the power of God's word and God's Spirit—not violence, but his creative and life-giving word—to free and to transform and to set the broken world right as it confronts the great lie with God's truth.

But our Epistle doesn't quite end there. Truth and justice, peace and faith, salvation and the word are all essential if we are going to stand firm. To take up these things is to be the people that Jesus has made us through our union with him. But union is about more than putting these things on, it's about real, literal union—or communion—with him. We need to talk with our commander. And so, in verses 18-20 Paul writes: "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 the saints. 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 secret truth of the gospel. That after all, is why I'm a chained-up ambassador. Pray that I

may announce it boldly; that's what I'm duty-bound to do."

Paul was in prison because of his preaching, because he'd put on the armour of God and because he'd proclaimed God's truth. But he knew that prison could not stop the march of the gospel and so he asked his brothers and sisters to pray for him—and not only for him, but *live* prayer, because that's what it means to be united to Jesus and to be baptised in God's Spirit—to be in constant communion with God. It's not just about formal prayer—like when you sit down with your Prayer Book and your Bible and you prayer the prayers and pray the Psalms. It's a life saturated with the presence of God and with communion with him.

I don't know how it works. I don't think anyone does. I've read books and books on prayer and it remains a mystery, but the best ones all conclude: I don't know how it works, but I know it works. Prayer doesn't change God—as if somehow hearing from me causes him to realise that my ideas and my plans are better than his. But prayer changes things and it changes me and it changes us and things—kingdom things, grace things, glory things—happen when we pray and live in that communion with God.

Brothers and Sisters, to pray is to act on and to live out the reality of Jesus' cross and of the new creation he's made us. It's to know that, through Jesus and the Spirit, we can now walk with God the way Adam and Eve once did. That we live in his presence and in his grace and in his love. It's to know that he is our strength. And so to pray, is to be what he has made us, it's to consciously reject our rebellion and sin, and to be his new creation. The mice—they know nothing of sin, nothing of rebellion. Mice have always been what God made them in the beginning. And, like I said, because of that, mice give him glory even when they're just doing the ordinary things mice do. We, on the

other hand, rejected that life. Jesus has given it back, but it's a struggle. That's why Paul urges us to put on God's truth and justice, his righteousness and peace. And it's why he urges us to pray without ceasing. Because reliance on God is the only way we'll put to rest our old nature and be able to live into the new one he's given. To pray is to look back to the cross in gratitude and to look forward in hope to God's new world, and find our life and our strength and everything else that matters in him—so that we can stand firm and so that we can glorify him.

So, Brothers and Sisters, stand firm. Stand firm and be the new creation that Jesus has made us. Remember that we stand with our king in the battle, but that this battle is not against flesh and blood. It's against the dark powers that corrupt flesh and blood, that make us hate and that make us enemies of one another. Stand firm in God's truth and justice, stand firm in his peace and his salvation. And confront the world with the good news of Jesus, crucified and risen. And pray, pray, pray, remembering that he is with us and that he is our strength and our hope.

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; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.