



Roanoke, Virginia

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“The Armor of God”

Ephesians 6:10-20

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Introduction:

Before we turn to our scripture reading, I want to take a moment to express my gratitude for my sabbatical this summer. Members of our staff and volunteers took on more responsibilities while I was away. I am so grateful for the many ways they stepped in to ensure programs and planning ran smoothly. Returning to work last week was not a burden, but a joy. I can genuinely say I missed you, I thought of you often, and I prayed for you while we were apart. You will hear a bit more about what I learned and what I got to do this summer in this week’s pastor’s email and in other future opportunities.

As we turn to our scripture passage in Ephesians 6, I also give thanks to my friend Dr. Sarah Wiles, pastor of Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, for a paper she wrote on this passage in 2017 for our preaching group, *By the Vine*. Her research was a great help.

Ephesians 6:10-20. Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power; ¹¹ put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, ¹² for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on the evil day and, having prevailed against everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand, therefore, and belt your waist with truth and put on the breastplate of righteousness ¹⁵ and lace up your



sandals in preparation for the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

This past week, our daughter attended her second Vacation Bible School in a row. Two weeks ago, she was here, of course, for our wildly successful VBS, Fish Tales. And this past week, she joined our friends at Raleigh Court Presbyterian Church for their Bible and Music Camp. She made this most excellent shield (*displayed the shield*).

It reminded me of similar wooden shields we made at Second Pres. back in 2016, when our VBS theme was Heroes for God (*shared photos via projector/ livestream*). Ephesians 6 was our key text. Volunteers – many of you – cut and sanded wood, sewed capes, and helped the children decorate their own custom shields of faith, belts of truth, and breastplates of righteousness. It was a fun and memorable week.

And so, I couldn't help but picture some of these images as I was preparing my sermon. And then, I asked myself, what does it look like for adults to put on the armor of God, not as a costume, but for real?

If you read my worship note in your bulletin, you already know that we can't *exactly* say who Ephesians was written for. Though it opens with "to the saints at Ephesus" (1:1), that address was added later. The letter has no names, no real context, but it was circulated widely throughout Asia Minor, and it reads more like a "to whom it may concern" theological treatise.

We do know it was likely written toward the end of the first century. That's important. The first wave of Christian hope, that Jesus' return was imminent, had passed. The church was settling into a second- or third-generation kind of faith. The church needed to know: what now?

In classic Pauline theology (like in 1 Corinthians 15) Christ's victory over earthly powers is presented as a future hope. But in Ephesians, the claim is even bolder: Christ *already has* overcome. The world may not recognize it, and we may not always see it, but the claim is clear: Christ is Lord, right now, even when it doesn't look like it (1:23). Their rule, the empire out there, Ephesians says, is ultimately an illusion.

Ephesians assumes that the Christian life involves conflict. Not comfort, not ease – conflict. But Ephesians makes it clear that the fight is *not* against other people. It's not the people who



always seem to stand in the way of our plans, not the people who harass or exclude us, not the people who make us mad, not the people who are clearly wrong or stuck in a hateful worldview. We aren't fighting against human enemies, Ephesians says, other people are never our enemies. They are as trapped as we are.

Our struggle, Ephesians says, is WAY bigger than that. Our struggle, according to this letter, is against the cosmic forces of this present darkness, the spiritual systems that damage and warp our world.

Now, many of us Presbyterians don't tend to believe the world is alive with spiritual forces and demons. But, let's be honest, there is something useful about the image. Because there *are* big forces at work in the world. There are social, political, structural, psychological forces that affect us. They are beyond our control. And some of them do cause us harm and bring death.

Theologians like Walter Wink and Charles Campbell have suggested that some of the most dangerous powers we face today aren't just human, but supra-human or meta-human. They are vast, systemic, and often invisible. Years ago, we worried about faceless corporations, transnational conglomerates that tilted global policies to favor the wealthy, reinforced racial injustice, and put both people and the planet at risk.

Those forces are still at work. But now they've been joined by new powers. We live much of our lives online, inside algorithm-driven platforms that shape what we see, what we believe, and sometimes even what we desire. They quietly trap us in silos and echo chambers that may or may not reflect reality. Artificial intelligence can mimic legitimate newscasters or powerful global leaders and, in seconds, stoke widespread fear or outrage. Most of us aren't equipped to tell the difference.

We, no less than Ephesians' first readers, grapple with forces that are difficult to track or unmask. And like our ancestors in faith, we seek faithful ways to avoid being duped and manipulated by these systems.ⁱ

My friend Sarah says that when she thinks about the forces of darkness, she thinks about her trips to Target.ⁱⁱ She goes in for one item and comes out with ten – cheap goods made in unjust conditions, destined for a landfill. She knows better. But she buys them anyway. What is that? Boredom? Consumerism? Capitalism? Human nature? All of the above?

I think of my phone, the tiny surveillance device in my pocket. I had a conversation with a friend about her recent car accident. Not five minutes later, my Instagram feed was flooded with



products to help me escape from my own wrecked vehicle someday. Preying on my fears, monetizing my friend's trauma... that's not a demon, but it *is* darkness.

Maybe these are trivial examples, but they add up, and the deeper harm isn't hard to see.

So, we need a God who takes evil seriously. We need a Savior who is alongside us in the battle. Truth, righteousness, peace ... those are lovely ideals, but they're no match for the weapons of our day. This stuff in Ephesians doesn't sound like power or strength in the world at all. But maybe that's the genius of this passage, and the reason I think it works as a way to pray and prepare for the difficulties we face in this world. The image undermines itself, revealing the emptiness of our notions of power, and showing the way to life instead.

How do we fight evil? Not with more evil. How do we fight hate? Not with more hate. Love, in all its weakness, is the only way through. That's the confession of the cross. We do not put our trust in guns and power, might and possessions. We trust in the one who was crucified, and so our image of strength is different. Our armor takes a different shape. When we find ourselves locked into a struggle with the powers of this world, and the demons of our own mind, this is what we do:

We wrap the truth around our waist like a belt. What good will truth do? Ask the person who has finally told the secret that couldn't be told, and whose life has been saved as a result. Ask the one who has confessed, my life is unmanageable, I am powerless, I need help. That kind of truth is strong, strong enough to bring back life from the grave.

70 years ago, 14-year-old Emmett Till died on an August day in Mississippi. Some say he winked at a white woman, though the woman who accused him recanted at the end of her life. For his alleged offense, he was tortured, mutilated, and killed.

When his body was recovered, Emmett Till's mother insisted on an open casket. She knew her battle was not with flesh and blood. She fastened that belt of truth around her and told the world what hate looked like. Her son's death became a galvanizing force for civil rights, because she dared to wear the armor of God. She strode into battle against the cosmic forces of evil that murdered her son, wearing truth around her waist.

We put on the breastplate of righteousness. A breastplate covers your heart, lungs, and all the important organs in the middle of our body. When we put on the breastplate of righteousness, we protect our heart, we guard our very breath before it is on our tongues. In the Bible, righteousness isn't about moral purity. It's always about God's deep concern for the vulnerable –



the widow, the poor, the immigrant, the orphan. Wearing righteousness means caring relentlessly for the most fragile parts of our world.

As for shoes, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. Somedays, we go barefooted, remembering we are dust, and to dust we shall return. Other days, we wear work boots, the kind meant for building homes, feeding the hungry, tending the sick. And some days, we'll need our dress shoes, ready to go toe to toe with the powerful. Whatever the day brings, wear what will make you ready to be a peacemaker.

And when we're really scared, we carry a shield of faith... which isn't practical at all. Shields are supposed to be solid and visible. Faith is neither. But the kind of faith we see in Jesus isn't about protection in the usual sense. It's not rigid. It's supple, strong enough to have its heart broken. When we face the worst, it's the only shield that will cover us: childlike trust, faith that goodness is stronger, that life rises from the dead again and again.

Don't forget the helmet of salvation. Protect your mental health. Do whatever you can to keep your head free and whole.

And finally, wield the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. This line has been used to justify saying horrible, harmful things to people – the Bible is a sword after all. But this is not a weapon to harm others. Our passage emphasizes that other people are not the enemy. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against all those things that seek to defeat life – fear and hopelessness and a culture of hate and violence. When we struggle with that, we need the Word that began creation, the Word that filled Mary's heart with song, the Word that called Lazarus out of the tomb, and the Word that speaks to us still today.ⁱⁱⁱ

- When we wonder what to do, Micah tells us: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.
- When we don't know where we belong, Isaiah reminds us: God says, "Fear not. I have claimed you. You are mine."
- When we're at our wit's end and can't manage on our own, we can trust in this: the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.
- When the love of God feels impossibly far off, when our faith wains, when all seems lost, we cling to Paul's words to the Romans: Nothing in all creation will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.



This is the strength we need. It's the only kind of strength that lasts. Everything else, every illusion of power, is already passing away.

It sounds like lunacy to go wading into combat clothed in the Spirit. It sounds like a sure way to lose, holding faith as your shield. It sounds like utter foolishness. As foolish as God Almighty showing up as a baby. As foolish as salvation through a cross. But this is the shape of our God. This is our confession about true power. This is the nature of our strength – a belt of truth, a breastplate of righteousness, shoes of peace, a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation, a sword of the Spirit. This is the only armor there is, and yet it's no kind of armor at all. May we, bit by bit, dare to lay down all our other weapons, and put on, piece by piece, only this, the armor of God.

ⁱ Sally A. Brown, "Commentary on Ephesians 6:10-20," WorkingPreacher.org, Aug 25, 2024, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-21-2/commentary-on-ephesians-610-20-7>.

ⁱⁱ Sarah Wiles, "Ephesians 6:10-20," for By the Vine Preaching Group, May 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

