

Pentecost 13B 22 August 2021
Ephesians 6:10-20
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Dear friends in Christ, fellow saints washed clean in the blood of our risen Saviour: Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, forever. Amen.

Know the enemy, don the whole armour of God, and pray without ceasing. Let's pray:

Many of you lived through or remember, World War 2. Your attitudes and lives were formed to a large extent by the necessities of frugality during times of scarcity and uncertainty. Many a yarn have been passed down through family generations of barbed wire, exposure to the elements, poor sanitation, dysentery, typhus, cholera. Long periods of boredom punctuated by the crack of a sniper's rifle, a mortar explosion, mustard gas. Life in the trenches and the horrors of war.

We younger ones might be thankful we're distant enough from such events not to be affected too much. Sympathetic, but not empathetic. Much in the way that we watched with pity this week, the panic of innocent people attempting to flee Afghanistan without really understanding the depth of the fear of living under a murderous regime.

And yet, you, dear Christians, are in the trenches of a far more dangerous battle. A struggle not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against Satan and evil. A battle that we're helpless to wage in our own strength. Our strength for battle comes from the Lord and his power. So, hear your Saviour's battle cry sounding through the Apostle Paul. Put on the full armour of God. And pray without ceasing. Today's message contains these three essential strategies: Know your enemy. Clothe yourself with God's armour. Be vigilant in prayer.

Knowing your enemy.

We imagine our enemies to be bullies at school, gossiping neighbours, abrasive work colleagues, or those with different political views to ours. Maybe the aches, pains, illnesses, and diseases that attack our body. Failures, losses, disasters, and tragedies make the list. More abstractly we might think of unfairness, injustice, poverty, or ignorance as the enemy. St Paul says differently.

‘Our struggle is not against enemies of 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’ (Ephesians 6:12).

We can probably face a bully or ignore a gossip. We can endure a tragedy or right an injustice supported by friends and neighbours. But we can't withstand the powers of darkness. We can't survive against the spiritual forces of evil from beyond our physical world. But Jesus can. It's because Jesus knows who the real enemy is, that he was able to cry out from the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). “They don't understand who's behind this.”

Jesus can and does help us because he rejected Satan's temptations. Jesus crushed Satan's head. Jesus paraded through hell itself as our crucified Victor, and rose again triumphantly. He holds the field of battle.

With might of ours can naught be done,
Soon were our fall effected;
But for us fights the valiant one
Whom God Himself elected.
Ask ye: Who is this?
Christ Jesus it is,
Of Sabaoth Lord,
And there's none other God;
He holds the field forever (*A mighty fortress is our God: LHS 195*).

When we know the real enemy, we know that our might counts for nothing. Our strength for battle only comes from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Saints, our real enemy isn't other people, but the devil, the liar, the accuser, the deceiver, who uses other people to work resentment and strife in our heart, tempting us to reject God's forgiveness. The devil deceives us into questioning God's love and giving up hope in his promises. And he uses the good things of life to lull us into spiritual sleep so that we forget how much we need Jesus.

He might leave us alone for a while. But the day of evil always comes. And even when our faith survives the attack, he white-ants it through lingering bitterness, anger, despair and hopelessness, or he puffs us up with pride and self-confidence, always trying to unseat us. This is why we need Jesus.

With his strength, no matter how severe the attack, or cunning the scheme, we will withstand Satan's arrows, we will stand victorious, because of Jesus and his mighty power.

Standing firm with God's armour.

- The belt of truth is a crucial piece of defensive armour. It guards our inmost being against the lies and deceptions of the enemy. Without an understanding of truth, we're vulnerable to being 'tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming' (Ephesians 4:14). Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), and "the truth will make you free" (John 8:32).
- The breastplate of righteousness protects our heart from Satan's accusations - "Tut, tut, tut. Look what you've done. How could God love someone like you?" But Christ's righteousness protects our heart and calms our conscience. Jesus reminds us, "I have fulfilled the law's righteous demands for you by my sinless obedience. See my pierced hands. See my empty tomb. I have secured God's full pardon. You are declared righteous. [For your sake Father made me to be sin who knew no sin, so that in me you might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21)]."

- The shoes of gospel peace help us stand firm against evil's missiles of doubt. We dig our peace shoes into the turf of God's Word and counter evil by declaring, 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose' (Romans 8:28). And if Satan taunts, "But remember what you did?" we stand firmly and reply, 'If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9).
- The shield of faith provides a blanket of protection. Faith reminds us that God is always true to his word. When Satan attempts to plague us with doubt or tempts us with instant gratification, faith detects his deception and quickly extinguishes the arrows. No matter what arrows of temptation Satan slings, they can't penetrate the shield of faith. That's how powerful God's word is. When Satan accuses us, faith chooses to believe that Jesus has redeemed us and that there is no more condemnation (Romans 8:1; Revelation 12:10-11).
- The helmet of salvation protects our head, where battles are fought in the mind. The assurance of salvation is our impenetrable defence against anything the enemy throws at us. Jesus said, 'Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell' (Matthew 10:28). With the helmet of salvation firmly buckled, we can 'destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ' (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).
- The sword of the Spirit is the cutting power of God's holy word: 'Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword' (Hebrews 4:12). The Holy Spirit works through the Holy Scriptures, using the power of the word to save us and give us spiritual strength and courage to fight corruption and evil in the world.

God's word is central to every piece of armour because the Word of God is the presence of Jesus.

God has given us armour to protect us against evil. He's given us the truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation and his holy word. He doesn't suit us up to go looking for trouble. He protects us so that we may stand strong in the victory Jesus has already won. Because Jesus has broken down the wall of hostility and brought peace to the nations, we can confidently fight life's battle knowing that the war is already won.

Staying alert in prayer.

Prayer connects us with God. Prayer turns to the Lord, relying on his strength. It's not our sincerity in prayer or our fervour that defends against Satan and defeats him. Rather, it's the One to whom we pray who brings us victory. So, 'pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication' [Ephesians 6:18]; formal or informal prayers, spontaneous or memorised, written or unwritten. And always pray the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). Don't let your prayer life fall asleep. Stay alert. Pray in the Spirit, that is, pray with your mind, heart, soul, and spirit focussing on the truths revealed in God's word, the Spirit's sword.

Pray not only for your own battle against Satan. Pray for your fellow Christians and please pray for me.

Don't pray that Jesus will make others more agreeable, less irritating, less objectionable. Rather, ask Jesus to make you more understanding, more loving, more peaceable. Ask him to show you how to be more patient, more amiable, to serve and love sacrificially. More of Christ, less of us. 'He must increase, but I must decrease' (John 3:30).

Saints, we fight a spiritual battle against our culture that tells us we must fight our own battles in the universe. This is a lie. We fight together, and we fight with our Commander [Joshua 5:14,15], Christ. May we always stand firm in him: knowing who our real enemy is, protected by God's armour, and persevering in prayer, that the mystery of the gospel of Jesus' saving love might be proclaimed boldly, to the glory of God. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.