

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

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August 22, 2021, The 13th Sunday After Pentecost/The 20th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 84:1-8, 10-12, Ephesians 6:10-20

Standing

Intro to NT Reading: Today we come to the end of the letter to the Ephesians that we have been listening to over the past two months. As we listen to the end of this letter, we need to remember that this letter came to people who were part of the early Christian church. They were persecuted by friends and neighbors for their faith. They also lived under the rule of Rome who governed and controlled their lives. So, when the author of the letter uses images of Roman military armor he is using a picture of something they saw every day. He is calling them to be strong and to stand strong in their new faith. Listen for the word of God:

This past Wednesday I spent a big chunk of time on the phone with Melanie on the AT&T Help and repair line. My voicemail wasn't working on my cell phone. She was having problems diagnosing what was happening so she decided to talk to me for a while. While I appreciated her friendliness, I really just wanted her to fix my phone!

She started by asking me what kind of work I did. I should have lied! When I told her I was a Presbyterian Pastor the floodgates opened. First, she told me she never been "entangled" in a Presbyterian worship service before; her grandfather was a Baptist preacher. Getting entangled with Presbyterians is a sermon for another day 😊.

Then she told me I'd been a pastor longer than she'd been alive; great! You know, I really just wanted her to fix my phone.

Then she tried to sell me a new product that would only add \$24 to my monthly bill. Somehow that led to a horrific murder she'd seen in the evening news. Then she told all about what the devil was up to and explained to me that we were living in the end times and it was important how we lived now.

And somehow through all of that, she finally found the problem and fixed my phone.

If she had gotten entangled with the Presbyterians, she might have realized that we don't talk about what the devil is up to very often. We are more prone to talking about what Jesus is up to.

But lately, I have been having a lot of conversations with some of you, and others, about evil, the devil and the end times.

These 18 months have not been easy times to live through, have they?

These months have gotten many people thinking about really big questions about life and faith, and good and evil, and who God is and what God is up to. We live in changing times, which is my understatement for this morning!

So, while you don't often hear me preach about passages like this morning's, Melanie from AT&T and Ephesians 6 invite us into this conversation. There are many places in the Bible that speak of satan or the devil, words that literally mean "the accuser" or "the adversary." The Bible speaks openly and often about the presence of evil. And the Bible speaks openly and often about the power of God over all evil.

In this passage from Ephesians the author says that we are "to stand against the wiles of the devil. For 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." (6:11-12)

This letter to the Ephesians was naming the spiritual warfare that those early Christians were

involved in. It was naming the reality of spiritual warfare in life, whether you believe a literal devil, or the metaphorical devil.

So, does evil exist? Yes, it does; but I want to start by saying I don't believe in it. What I believe in is Jesus Christ. I put my faith in Jesus; standing on that foundation I say that evil exists, and spiritual warfare exists. While this may sound like I'm just playing with language, it is so much more than that.

When I was a new seminary student, in the very first week of classes 10 of us were in a small precept group with our Theology professor. Early in our discussion one of the students said he believed in the devil and this professor went ballistic. Soon they were literally screaming at each other in a rage-filled argument; it was terrifying, and incredibly uncomfortable to be sitting there.

Unbeknownst to us, this student had flunked theology the year before and he and this professor were renewing an old and bitter conflict. We went from that class to lunch and talked to friends who were a year or two ahead of us in seminary. They went back to this prof and told him he had terrified his precept students and they were all afraid of speaking in class because it appeared that we would get yelled at if we were wrong. At the beginning of our next precept class, he started by saying that he had asked the other student to leave the precept, and then he chuckled and said he'd heard that the nine of us had been pretty traumatized.

He went on to explain that what he was trying to do was make a basic point of Christian belief that was foundational for him.

We don't believe in the devil or in evil, we believe in Jesus.

This isn't just about language. It's about where we put our faith, our energy, our thoughts and our heart.

I was reminded of a time my sophomore year of high school when I went on a Youth Group Retreat with a friend's church. One night we were sitting around talking and someone asked the youth group leader about evil. The movie *The Exorcist* had come out recently and people wanted to know about demons, hauntings and possession. I've never forgotten what her youth leader said. He told us that there were spiritual realms that we knew nothing about and we didn't need to explore them. He said he thought there was a danger for us as humans to explore those realms.

He said what we needed to explore and know about was Jesus and the life he lived on earth, and the ways Jesus continues to live in our lives.

Then he told us that every time an evil spirit confronted Jesus in the New Testament Jesus was always more powerful. Even before any of Jesus' followers realized who Jesus was, the demons or evil spirit knew exactly who he was. They would yell at him: "Jesus, Son of God what do you have to do with us, stay away from us." Often their very first words were: "Jesus, we know who you are."

And every single time, without exception Jesus banished those evil spirits and they were no more.

There was no good vs. evil as equal opponents as seen in *The Exorcist*, and every movie like it since. Jesus holds all the power; period.

So, this is where I want us to start our look at Ephesians 6. We believe in Jesus, and yes there is evil and the spiritual warfare Ephesians addresses.

We can talk about these things because the power and protection of Jesus is all around us, that is what was most true for those Ephesians, and it is what is most true for us.

The author to the Ephesians writes: “For 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.”

I don't know exactly what everything listed in this sentence means. And I don't know how the evil we see around us is caused or affected by the spiritual forces of evil. I don't need to know that.

What I do know is that God knows what this list means, and God gives us the tools to use when we are aware that we are in the presence of evil. We can recognize evil without knowing what supernatural realm it comes from.

This is where I rely on that seminary professor and that youth group leader long ago. We believe in and put our faith in Jesus Christ. It isn't our place to wander into other realms. And yet as followers of Christ we are called to stand up against evil. And we do that by relying on our God.

And what does that evil look like? I wish this discussion was taking place in an adult education class and not just here in this sanctuary, because together we could brainstorm the list. Some evil is blatantly evident, some is hidden, and some is insidiously built into the fabric of our society:

- evil looks like Hitler's regime in Germany, Assad's regime in Syria, Pol Pot in Cambodia, apartheid in South Africa, genocide in Rwanda, everyday Afghans and American allies living in fear now.
- evil looks like slavery and sex trafficking, the selling of other human beings, that continues in many parts of the world, and in our own community.
- evil looks like discrimination and violence against people because of their skin color, age, sexual orientation, nationality, religion or gender.
- evil looks like clergy sexual abuse, silence in the face of clergy sexual abuse in all denominations. It looks like
 - silence when children in our neighborhoods, schools and families are being physically and sexually abused and no one speaks up because they don't want to interfere in a family's privacy.
- evil also looks like bullying in person, or on-line, or by text,
- evil looks like one in every seven American children living in poverty and going to bed hungry,
- evil can be loud and obvious, it can be hidden, it can take place in silence, it can take place any time power is abused, it can take place when dangerous secrets are kept.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called by Ephesians 6 to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of God's power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand...take up the whole armor God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Four times in these few verses we are called to stand firm.

The author of Ephesians puts this into a picture language that would have made so much sense to those who first got the letter. He says that when we are in the presence of evil, we are to pick up the full armor of God and put it on. In the presence of evil, we are dressing ourselves, and protecting ourselves, with what God has given to us to stand firm.

When the first people to receive this letter heard it read, they would have imagined the battle gear of the Roman army and the Roman Empire who governed them. The letter writer called them to use the images of battle gear so they could know their strength and power was coming from God who would protect them, and protect us, in the midst of spiritual warfare. (Serendipity, 56.2.3ff):

“Stand therefore,” he writes: “and fasten the belt of truth around your waist.”

A Roman soldier wore a leather belt where he hung his sword, he also secured his tunic and/or cloak and his armor into the belt so nothing got in his way during battle.

The belt that keeps us free to move about in the face of evil is the belt of truth.

Next, put on the “breastplate of righteousness.”

Soldiers wore breastplates made of leather or metal. This was a major piece of their armor, protecting their internal organs.

Our breastplate is made of righteousness, or right living, which means the way we live as God’s people protects us and covers our vitality.

“As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.”

Roman soldiers wore “leather half-boots...with heavy studded soles that enabled them to dig in and resist being pushed out of place during battle.

Our shoes of faith are to help us “dig in” in the face of evil to proclaim the gospel of peace, not the gospel of vengeance, retaliation, punishment or just war, but the gospel of peace.

Then he writes: “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.

A soldier’s shield was oblong in shape, made of layers of wood on an iron frame. This was covered with linen cloth and animal hides. Then the cloth or hide was soaked with water.

One of the tactics of war was to set arrows on fire and then shoot them into the ranks of soldiers to catch them on fire so they would break ranks, and be easier to attack. When a soldier’s shield was wet it extinguished the arrows the enemy fired at them.

Our shield is made of faith. Faith that is a gift. Faith in Christ who gives us power.

Next: “Take the helmet of salvation.”

A soldier’s helmet was made of heavy metal and lined with felt or sponge. It protected their heads from almost all weapons.

Our protection is salvation which is a gift given to us by Jesus in his death on the cross and resurrection to new life.

And finally: take up “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Roman swords were short stabbing swords that were used in hand-to-hand combat. This is the only offensive weapon in the list. The rest are for defense.

Our sword is the word of God, which means the words we have from God in the Bible. Not our words but God’s words.

Truth,
rightness before God,
the gospel of peace,
faith,
salvation,
and the word of God:

these are all part of the armor of God that are meant to be a part of our life and a part of our arsenal against evil and spiritual warfare.

They are gifts freely given to us by our God.

We need this armor because we are called to stand and not be passive in the face of evil.

We aren't asked to attack, but to stand firm, relying on the strength that comes from God's protection, not our own powers.

We are to " Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication." We are to take up the armor and then pray for the Holy Spirit to be all around us, and all around God's people.

So what does it look, and sound like, when we are standing up against evil, relying on God's armor, believing in Christ, and praying in the Spirit?

It means we are not afraid to speak when someone is being attacked or silenced by violence or oppression or discrimination;

we are not afraid to ask why systems do not honor the integrity of all of God's children within our places of work, our investments, our schools, our churches, and our families.

When we are standing up against evil, relying on God's armor, believing in Christ, and praying in the Spirit

we are not afraid to be the face and voice of Christ with all of the people in our lives, our church, our neighborhood, and our community, even when they do not look like us, talk like us, smell like us, sound like us, or believe like us;

and we are not afraid to believe that peace, justice, healing, hope and the Kingdom of God on earth can take place in our lifetime, in our community, in our world. Because in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, spoken during apartheid in South Africa:

"Good is stronger than evil;
love is stronger than hate;
light is stronger than darkness;
life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours, through him who loves us."

Serendipity 201 *Teamwork--Together in Christ, Ephesians*, Littleton: Serendipity House, 1989, 1998, pp. 56-58