

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

August 25, 2024, The 14th Sunday After Pentecost/the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 84:1-8, 10-12 (The Message Translation, responsively), Ephesians 6:10-20

I BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST

Listen to these words from Archbishop Desmond Tutu of 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."

When I read the assigned passage for this morning from Ephesians, I was reminded of something one of the Confirmation Youth wrote years ago. When asked what they would change about church they wrote: *"I would change most of the topics of the sermon only because we usually talk about human experiences and sometimes about Jesus and his disciples, but we never talk about the other half of religion. The part about how or if the devil and demons played a part in any of this, because they must have. Jesus descended into hell where he had to come face to face with the devil and demons. I think we should hear a little more about the evil instead of talking about the peace and acting like the evil is not a threat and does not exist."*

I agree that there is a danger "in talking about peace and acting like the evil is not a threat and does not exist."

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 of Jesus' power and protection, I can say 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 in my first year of seminary, our large lecture classes were broken into precepts of 10 students who met once a week with a professor or doctoral student. In my Theology class I was in a group our Theology professor. Early in our discussion of the week's subject one of the students said he believed in the devil and this professor went ballistic. Soon they were screaming at each other in a rage-filled argument; it was loud and terrifying, and incredibly uncomfortable to be sitting there. 9 out of the 10 of us in our precept then stumbled out of the class convinced we would never speak up because if we were wrong, we would be yelled at and attacked in a violent way.

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 2nd and 3rd year students. They went back to this prof and told him he had terrified his precept students and we were all afraid of talking, ever, in his precept.

At the beginning of our next 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 theology, or the study of God. We don't believe in the devil or in evil, we believe in Jesus Christ.

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 about a year and half before and

people wanted to know about demons, hauntings and possession. I'll never forget what her youth leader said because it has guided my teaching and preaching ever since. 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 he continued 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 is no good vs. evil as equal opponents as seen in The Exorcist, and every movie like it since. Jesus holds all the power, always; period.

"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."

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.

I firmly believe that we need ask for that protection and rely on it when we have these conversations.

The author to the Ephesians writes: "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh (meaning human enemies), 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."

To answer the Confirmation student from long ago, 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. 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. In these few verses in Ephesians Paul uses the word "stand" four times. And we do that by relying on our God whose power is always spiritually stronger.

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:

On the international stage:

--Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian deaths since then, and the rape and sexual violence against women, men and children is evil.

--Hamis overtaking the music festival in Israel and killing over a thousand people and taking hostages is evil; as are the atrocities happening to the Palestinian peoples where over by the

beginning of this month over 40,000 Palestinian men, women and children have been killed and 1.9 million Palestinians in Gaza have been displaced from their homes.

--Assad's regime in Syria has killed over half a million civilians since the unrest began; 100's of thousands of others have become refugees in nearby Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon.

--and Assad's regime reminds us of the killing fields of Cambodia, the terror of Idi Amin, apartheid in South Africa and genocide in Rwanda.

--evil looks like slavery and sex trafficking that continues in many parts of the world, including our own neighborhoods here in the Quad Cities.

--evil looks like discrimination and violence against people because of their skin color, age, sexual orientation, nationality, religion or gender.

It looks like not remembering that every single person you see is a child of God.

--evil looks like silence in the face of sexual abuse and rape by clergy in all denominations.

--It looks like silence when children in our neighborhoods, schools and families are being physically, emotionally 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 five 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 takes place every time power is abused, it can take place when dangerous secrets are kept.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to (quote) "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.

We are God's hands and feet, God's eyes and ears and voices here on earth and we are called to stand up and speak up against evil, under the protection of Jesus.

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 take up the full armor of God and put it on. In the presence of evil, we are dressing ourselves in what God has given to us. We do this so that we can stand up against the evil that is around us.

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. The phrase "the full armor of God" means the complete list of everything a soldier would need to wear

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

This full armor includes everything a Roman soldier would wear, and this image invites us to suit up in spiritual armor because God needs us to stand strong in God's name and for God's sake.

"Stand therefore," Paul 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 God's 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, which means right living based on who God has called us to be. The way we live as God's people protects our hearts and spirits so we are ready to stand and speak and act against evil.

"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, retribution, punishment or war, but the gospel of peace.

"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. 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 in Christ who gives us power to know that Jesus is always more powerful than the evil that come at us.

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 and resurrection, we are protected and saved by Jesus' love.

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.

Our sword is the word of God, which means the words we have from God in the Bible.

An author I read this week pointed out that all the parts of the armor are defensive, they are for protection. The only offensive weapon in this list is the Word of God. The Bible gives us weapons against evil as it shapes and molds us as children of God.

Green, Joel B, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, Carolyn J. Sharp, eds, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3 Season after Pentecost, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021, p. 254*

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.

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

And we stand relying on the strength that comes from God, not our own powers.

And then finally 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 Spirit to be all around us and all around God's people.

And 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 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 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 we believe IN Jesus Christ. And through his power:

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."

Ephesians 1:20-23

²⁰ God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.