

Ephesians 6:10-18:

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.”

Good morning everyone. If you’re surprised to see that I am the one giving the sermon today, let me assure you that I am even more surprised than you. So how did I get here? As you may know, Heather usually does the sermon when Pastor Lisa is on vacation. Heather did a really great job last week, but was starting to feel a little overwhelmed at writing this week’s sermon while she was also dealing with the many, many contractors that will be restoring our church after the catastrophic damage we sustained during the tropical storm that visited us a few weeks ago. So when I saw her struggling, I volunteered to do the sermon this week. Much to my surprise, Heather took me up on the offer. So here I am.

Last week, Heather stated that she was choosing the scripture for her sermon from the lectionary. Until recently, I did not know what that was. So for those who do not know, it is a book containing scripture readings that are used at set dates as a guide in services of worship across denominations. It took me awhile to figure this out, but there were a few times when I had made comments about the sermon I had heard for a particular Sunday to a few friends from other denominations and much to my surprise their church had also used the same scripture that very week. That’s when I understood what the lectionary was. So the lectionary suggested the scripture we should use for this Sunday to be on the Armor of God. To be frank, I would love to be a fly on the wall at some of the other denominations to hear their perspective on the Armor of God. My sermon on the armor of God might be considered somewhat atypical since I haven’t really been trained to speak on scripture. In fact, before I came to this church nine years ago, I only knew a few passages from the Bible, one of which was, “Knock and the door shall be opened unto you.” Well, I can say for sure that volunteering to do this sermon has certainly opened a door to a new experience for me.

The Armor of God passage is taken from Ephesians. Ephesians is a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the people of Ephesus who were faithful to Jesus Christ.

He wrote this letter to them because he could not physically be there due to his imprisonment in Rome for his beliefs. Paul had visited the Ephesians about four years prior in order to spread the good news about Jesus. So this letter was a way of communicating with them and checking in with them to see how they were doing with their new found knowledge of right living. Paul starts by reminding them of their old ways of acting such as gratifying the cravings of their sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. He then praises them for being on a new footing, now that they were following the ways of Christ. He seems to be truly excited that this new way of life has been adopted by them. But at the same time, he seems to be a *little* nervous that they may not be able to hold onto this wonderful way of living. After all, they were human. So Paul then goes on to remind them of how to live by giving them clear instructions. He tells them “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs.”

He goes on to say, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.” This was certainly good advice then as it is for today, given what is going on in our world at the present moment.

Then Paul warns them that even if you are doing your very best in living this purer way, it might be difficult to stand firm in your convictions because of evil forces. He says, “Do not give the devil a foothold and let no one deceive you with empty words.” He also adds, “Have nothing to do with the fruitless seeds of darkness; but rather expose them.”

So after going on and giving advice on how to have right relationships with people close to them, Paul gives his final order on how to resist straying from this virtuous life; He says put on the full armor of God... **and** pray. He gives this order because he wants these new followers to be able to stand strong against the devil’s schemes. He clarifies that this struggle is not against other people, but against the evil powers of the dark world which have influenced these people to do bad actions. He is saying it is actually the spiritual force of evil that is the culprit. He knows these forces are strong and that it may be very difficult to avoid their influence.

If you look back on your life, I am sure many of you can relate to being subject to the influences of evil powers, knowing what is right, but doing the wrong action anyway. Even Paul wonders about why he chooses the wrong action when he knows better. In Romans, chapter 7: verses 15 – 20. He says, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer myself who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.” Here, Paul early on hints that there is an evil force that makes him do what he doesn’t want to do.

Given that he believes this, and given the fact he is now in prison and staring 24/7 at his guards dressed in armor, it is not surprising that he comes up with the idea of the armor of God.

It is at this moment that I would like to share with you **my** spiritual battle with the evil forces that were at play in my life in November of 2011, when I chose to divorce my husband of three years. Looking back on it, and in context of this scripture, I can now see how evil forces had taken over his life and in turn were wreaking havoc on mine. At the time, I was in really bad shape and Heather, whom I had known for many, many years, had noticed my decline. So she took me out to lunch and over a grilled cheese sandwich, she asked me where God was in my life. I was really taken back by her question. At first, I was speechless. Why in the world would she asking me this? She knows I have always had a strong connection with God. As I started to gather my words to question why she was even asking me this, I realized the words were not there. I finally had to humble myself and say, "I think I lost Him."

She then said the words that changed my life. She said come to my church so that you can find Him again. And so I did. I came to this church looking for some kind of hope that my life would get better.

With two Sundays under my belt, I was not getting better. After all, it is not about **my** timing and **my** plans, it is about God's timing and His plans; for two weeks later, I had a nervous breakdown and had to be hospitalized. I had no defenses at all. Even my body could not support my weight. My legs would wobble when I tried to walk. My head would fall forward as my neck could not even support it, and when I was given a tiny paper cup of water to drink, I could barely lift it to my lips. Yes, I was down and out. The evil forces had won. And who knows how long I would have been in that condition had it not been for the loving people of this church, my sober sisters, and my family. They were the angel armies that came to my rescue.

About a few weeks after I was released from the hospital, Heather gave me the exact scripture I read today on the armor of God. While I could not quite comprehend at that time the implications of what it was saying, I held onto the scripture knowing that it would serve me well in the future.

What I realize now is that those people who were concerned about me, who showed up to be by my side were wearing their own full armor of God, whether they knew it or not. They recognized the evil forces that were working against me and essentially said to me, Here, Here is my full armor of God, which I will lend to you so that you may recover.

As I put on the belt of truth, I came to believe that I could negotiate the challenges ahead, because the truth was, my loving God was by my side at all times. I knew that to be true because those people who cared about me during this very difficult time in my life were always by my side, and the truth is that God works through people.

As I put on the breastplate of righteousness to protect my heart and other vital organs, I grew stronger. Righteousness is necessary in order to be protected because righteousness means to be in right relationship with God. During my marriage, I had lost my connection to God because I was working twelve hours days, six days a week in order to save my husband's medical practice.

You know it is kind of ironic because at the time, I thought I was being righteous in choosing to sacrifice myself in order to help him. I thought that being a martyr was showing him how much I loved him. Looking back on this, I am reminded of Martha and Mary's behavior when Jesus came to visit them. In this story, we find Martha hurrying about to ensure that preparations would be completed in time to have dinner with her special guest, while Mary was choosing to sit at the feet of Jesus so she may absorb His wisdom. I was definitely a Martha, not realizing I had all my priorities wrong. I now realize my spiritual life must come first. There are no if's, and's, or but's about it.

Next my friends used their footwear which is fitted with the readiness of the Gospel of Peace, so that they could insert themselves between me and any destructive force. And when I was ready, they gave me my own footwear so that I could sidestep the evil that continued to come at me during the three year divorce procedure. This footwear also gave me the power to walk toward God by going to church and by going to my recovery meetings, so God could talk to me and show me His love through people. After all, God's language is people.

My friends also gave me the shield of faith. The shield of faith protected me from the cunning, baffling, and powerful forces of evil which I might not even recognize if they crossed my path. This brings to my mind the scene in the Garden of Eden, when Eve did not recognize the snake as the dark power that it was. That evil force convinced her that there was an easier, softer way of life, so she succumbed to his power. I do not want to succumb again to anything that will separate me from God.

My friends then gave me the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit which is the word of God. When I think of the helmet protecting me, I can not help but think that it is protecting my brain and therefore my thoughts. MY thoughts can be dangerous because they can be full of distortive thinking. I now know that these distortions have the power to bring me down into the spiral of darkness very quickly and render me helpless. Therefore, the helmet is very important in preventing me from the destructive thoughts coming from evil forces, because these forces told my everything was my fault; that I was not good enough; that I was not lovable; and that being true to myself was selfish. So when my friends offered, I also took the sword of the spirit which is the word of God. I took that sword so when the distortive thoughts began to appear again, I was able to slash through those falsehoods and become the person God meant me to be which is stronger than I could have ever imagined.

So, after my friends gave me this wonderful armor of God, they did not stop there because they knew I was still not fully protected without prayer. Paul says, "Pray in the spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests and for all the Lord's people." What a profound thought that was for me. Up to that moment, I had somehow gotten the message from my early years of Christian education that it was bad to ask God for something for myself. I was finally liberated to say to God, "HELP ME" without profound guilt. And indeed He did help me, for I can now stand fast against the evil forces that make me think that I am less than; that tell me my life is

meaningless, and that I am a victim in all circumstances. Because of prayer strengthening my connection to God, I can now find gratitude in all areas of my life no matter what is going on.

So now I invite you to put on the armor of God so that you may resist evil and stand fast in all that is good. Put on the belt of truth; and if you find that you are having difficulty in discerning what the truth is, especially in today's world, just remember that the truth is always based on love and is not selfish. Put on the breastplate of righteousness to protect yourself from the obstacles that may prevent you from being in right relationship with God. Hold up that shield of faith so you can be confident that evil will not penetrate your well being and wreak havoc on your life and the lives of others. Don the footwear of readiness to help you go to whatever lengths are necessary so that love, goodness, and truthfulness will win out in the end. Place the helmet of salvation on your head so that you may have right thinking always and not be influenced by any lies being spewed in hate. Hold tightly to the sword of the spirit which will enable God's word to always be on the tip of your tongue ready to effectively slash through the evil words of today. And finally, pray. Pray that in the end, that which is for the better good of all humanity will win over all evil. Amen