

Proper 17B (Pentecost 13)

Text: Ephesians 6:10-20

Title: Christian Warfare

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Christianity is not a spectator sport. It's not something that you can watch from the sidelines. It's not a hobby for the weekend, or something special to do for the holidays. Christianity is not a spectator sport.

To be a Christian is to be at war, to be involved in a long, drawn-out battle. And you are on the front lines.

Your battle is not against flesh and blood. Your enemies are not mere mortals. Your battle is not against Roman Catholics or Mormons or Methodists or Muslims, not against terrorists or abortionists or homosexuals. Your battle is against Satan himself and His army of fallen angels.

We are surrounded by evil. Paul talks about this present darkness that threatens us. You can see evidence of the darkness all around you. Violence, greed, abuse, Satan's influence in this world is hard to ignore. He is your enemy

Satan has been your enemy since the day you were baptized. When you were baptized, and again when you were confirmed, you renounced the devil and all his works and all his ways. You set yourself up as his enemy and were drafted into the Lord's army.

Since then, Satan has been against you. He can't control you, but he can tempt you. He can whisper lies in your ears and try to deceive you. He can try to persuade you to do your own will rather than the will of your heavenly Father.

Satan is dangerous, but he's already been defeated. You could compare our situation to the ending of WWII. When the allies landed at Normandy, the outcome of the war was decided. It was only a matter of time until the enemies were defeated. But they still had fight left in them. The Germans were still dangerous, and still won a few battles along the way. Many soldiers lost their lives between D-day and V-E day.

Satan has been defeated. Jesus won the decisive battle on Easter morning. But the war is not yet over. Satan still has fight left in him. Paul encourages us to stand firm. Hold your ground. Don't give an inch.

But how, you may ask. I'm not much of a soldier. I'm too old, you may say. Or, I'm too young. Or, I'm inexperienced, I haven't been trained. But the Lord wants you. He has chosen you to be a soldier in His army.

On your own, Satan would be no match for you. You would be easily overpowered. You are much too weak.

But you don't fight on your own, and you don't even fight with your own strength. St. Paul writes, "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His strength."

It is only through the strength of the Lord that you have any chance, any possibility of prevailing against Satan. On your own you are weak and helpless, but through the Lord you have power and strength.

The Lord gives you armor to wear, to protect us against Satan and all his attacks. You are clothed in armor from head to toe, from shoes to helmet, along with a belt, a breastplate, a shield, and even a sword.

Where does this armor come from? How do you get it? How do you put it on? What in the world is Paul talking about?

The answer, of course, is Jesus. Jesus himself is your armor, your protection against Satan's attacks. Each piece of the armor is a description or an attribute of Jesus.

Let's take them each in order.

First there is the belt of truth buckled around your waist. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Jesus is the truth. What He speaks is always true. Satan will attack you with lies. He will tell you evil, awful things, like how God could never love a sinner like you, lies, like how fun and free it is to live apart from God's law. He lied to Adam and Eve, and he's been lying ever since. He will lie to you. Satan cannot be trusted.

Yet how can you tell Satan's voice from the Lord's? Satan has deceived many good folks in the past. The Lord speaks to us in His Word, in the Holy Scriptures. If you want to be sure that it's His voice, turn to the Bible. That's where the Lord speaks to you. That's where His truth is found.

Second, Paul mentions the breastplate of righteousness. Again, this is all Jesus. Jesus is the righteous one. He lived a perfect, holy, righteous life. Christ freely gives you His own righteousness. That is your protection. When Satan accuses you, and when he points out all of your sins and faults, then you point to Jesus. Jesus gives you His perfect, holy, righteous life for your own. You are not righteous, but you are declared righteous because of Jesus' death for you. Satan can no longer accuse you because you are in Christ and His righteousness is now yours.

Third comes the Gospel, the good news of peace, which are the shoes on our feet. Satan sows division. He tears apart families and friends and even congregations. He also tries to tear you apart from God. The good news, the gospel, is that you have peace and reconciliation with God. Through the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ, you have peace with God. You were born an enemy of God, but Christ has made peace between you and God and brought you back together. This is the good news that sets your feet running to tell the world what Jesus has done.

Fourth, there is the shield of Faith. Paul says that faith will extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. How can a shield extinguish arrows? In those days, Roman shields were made of

wood. Wood is cheap and easy to manufacture, but also quite flammable. A flaming arrow would quickly reduce a wooden shield to ash. So the Romans covered their shield with leather or animal hides. The leather coverings kept the arrows from penetrating the shields and eventually extinguished them.

Faith is nothing more than Jesus, Jesus doing the whole job of our salvation. Jesus himself absorbed all the flaming arrows that Satan shot at Him. He took the full brunt of the attack and died in our place on Good Friday. Jesus became your human shield, dying in your place.

Fifth, the helmet of salvation. Jesus' name means salvation, the Lord who saves. You have been saved, you have been Jesus-ed, and that is the protection on your head. You know that whatever Satan throws at you, ultimately you will be saved.

The last piece of armor is the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. The specific type of sword Paul references here is a short sword or dagger, typically about 2 feet in length and two inches wide. It was for fighting in close combat. Your left arm would typically hold your shield, and you could deliver short, powerful blows with the dagger in your right.

This is the only offensive weapon you have been given. No spear, no javelin, no bow or arrows, nothing to fight with except for this one, small sword. The rest of your armor, your belt, shoes, breastplate, shield, and helmet are all defensive, they are your protection against Satan's attacks. The only thing you have to strike back with is the Word of God.

Remember when Jesus struggled with Satan in the wilderness. Jesus was weak, Jesus was hungry, and Satan came to tempt Him. Three times Satan tempted Jesus. Three times Jesus replied "It is written." Satan could not stand Jesus' counterattack and so he left Him.

The only way for you to strike back against Satan is through the Word of God. This is why it is so important for you to be here week after week to hear God's Word read and preached. This is why it is so important for you to come to Bible Class, for your children to come to confirmation. This is why it is so important for you to study and meditate on God's Word each and every day.

Satan will attack you. It's not a matter of if, but when. You can't just stand on the sidelines and watch. He will attack. He will use lies and deception to try to trick you. Your only response, the only way for you to fight back is with God's Word. You need to be ready.

So take up the armor you have been given, and stand in the truth, the peace, the righteousness, the faith, the salvation, and the Word that is Jesus Christ. Jesus is your protection against Satan's attacks. He has defeated Satan before and we know that in the end, he will be victorious once more.

Finally, Paul tells us to pray. We're not in this alone, and our brothers and sisters in combat need our prayers. The churches that are persecuted need our prayers. The churches that have become comfortable and complacent need our prayers. Those who are suffering need our prayers. The poor need our prayers. The young need our prayers. The old need our prayers.

Those in power need our prayers. The powerless need our prayers. All the saints need our prayers.

And Paul, too. Paul could use the prayers of the Ephesians. He is in prison for preaching the gospel, but he's still looking for opportunities to preach.

So pray for your pastor, that he may proclaim declare God's word boldly, whether it's here in the pulpit, or in the hospital or nursing home, whether it's to those in this congregation, or folks who have never heard.

Christianity is not a spectator sport. It's a battle, it's an all out war. It's not easy to stand against Satan and his attacks, but the Lord gives you everything you need. Jesus is your belt, your shoes, your breastplate, your shield, your helmet and your sword.

Be strong in the Lord, in armor of light,
With helmet and sword, with shield for the fight,
On prayer be depended, be belted and shod,
In breastplate resplendent: the armor of God.

So come now, and receive Jesus' body and blood once more to strengthen you and arm you for the fight that wages outside these walls.