

Proper 17B

Text: Eph 6:10-20

Title: The Unseen Enemy

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One of the struggles in living in this age of terrorism is that your enemies are often hidden from sight. You don't know who's an enemy and who's a friend. You don't know when or where the next strike will come from. It's not like facing an enemy on the battlefield, wearing a uniform. Those sorts of enemies you can prepare for. You can be ready for the fight. You know what to expect.

But the enemy who blends into the crowd, the enemy who pretends to be one of us, that is the truly frightening one. That is the enemy who keeps you up at night.

Satan is this sort of hidden enemy. St. Paul writes, "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."

Satan is a spiritual force. You can't see him. You don't know when he's going to attack.

Satan doesn't show up on your doorstep or on your shoulder dressed in red with horns and pitchfork. He doesn't call ahead to make an appointment to tempt or torture you.

He comes when you're vulnerable and not expecting it. He comes in ways that are sneaky and devious, so you don't know it's him. If you knew right away that it was Satan at work, you'd probably run the other way. But he comes in sneaky, hidden ways.

Because you can't see him, because his work isn't always obvious, some people doubt whether he truly exists at all. For some, Satan is just a made up bogeyman to scare kids into behaving, or some old superstition left over from the Middle Ages.

But Satan is real. He's been around since the Garden of Eden. He tempted Adam and Eve, he tempted the Israelites, he tempted Job, he tempted Jesus, and he tempts you, too.

Satan will tempt you to sin, to do what you know is wrong. We all know about that. But that's not all.

Once you've sinned, after you've done wrong and feel guilty, Satan tempts you again. This time Satan tempts you to think that your sin is so bad that Jesus couldn't forgive you. Satan tempts you to think that you're beyond help, that you are simply unlovable.

And that's not all. There's another way Satan tempts you. Sometimes people will sin against you, and Satan will tempt you to think that a good and loving God could never let you be mistreated, that because the church is full of hypocrites and sinners, that somehow, because

God's people aren't perfect, that somehow God himself is at fault, that God's Word is not reliable, that you should avoid the church altogether.

Satan is out to attack your faith, and he does this by drawing you away from Jesus and away from the fellowship of the church, by disconnecting you from the means of grace. Just like a lion separates a member from the herd before attacking it, so Satan will use doubt and questions and the sins of other people to separate you from Jesus, and from His body, the church.

So what do you do? How do you defend yourself against such a sneaky, insidious enemy, with so many ways to attack you?

The Lord doesn't leave you defenseless. The Lord himself equips you; He fits you with the armor that you need to stand up against Satan's attacks.

You cannot resist the devil on your own. If you try to do it yourself, you will fail. He's simply too strong, too powerful, too insidious for you to stand up to him on your own. That's why St. Paul writes, "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His strength." If you rely on your own strength, you will certainly fail.

The Lord gives you strength by equipping you with armor. The Lord equips you to stand firm, to stand guard against Satan's attacks. He doesn't equip you to go on a crusade against Satan. You don't need to go out looking for trouble, putting yourself in situations you know you will be tempted. Satan will find you, and so it's important that you are ready.

Paul paints a picture of a soldier on guard duty, a sentry standing on the wall, armed and ready to face the enemy, whenever the enemy appears.

The Lord gives you the armor that you need to be ready and prepared for battle. Each piece of armor is a piece of Jesus Christ Himself. As you are putting this armor on, you are covering yourself with Jesus Christ. As you are clothed with this armor, Jesus Christ is fighting in you and through you.

It begins with the belt of truth. Satan's weapon is lies. He tells lies about God, and convinces you that God isn't kind and loving, that God is cruel, God doesn't care, or that God doesn't exist.

The only way to combat lies is with the truth. Jesus Christ is the truth. Isn't not just that Jesus says things that are true, but who Jesus is and what he does shows us the truth about God. Do you think that God doesn't love you, doesn't care about you? Look to Jesus on the cross, see him dying there for you. There's truth that will overcome any of Satan's lies.

God also gives you the breastplate of righteousness. Satan will attack you with evil and wickedness. He will get you to sin and make you feel worthless. He will have other people sin against you, leaving you feeling dirty, ashamed and unclean.

Yet Jesus Christ gives you His righteousness. Jesus lived a perfect, holy life and gives you the credit for everything He's done. In Holy Baptism He puts His name on you, and so when God

the Father looks at you, He sees Jesus Christ and all the good that He has done. Jesus makes you clean and pure and holy once more.

For shoes, God gives you the readiness of the gospel of peace. Satan comes to bring conflict, division, war. Satan tries to disconnect you from God by your sinfulness and from your fellow Christians when you sin against one another. Nothing makes Satan happier than to see two Christians going at it. Nothing makes Satan happier than fights and divisions within the Church.

Jesus comes to bring peace and unity, to heal divisions. We are reconciled with God through Jesus Christ. Because of His sacrificial death, we are God's friends, not His enemies.

And because we have peace with God, we also have peace with one another. We are all sinners. We are all forgiven. We all share in the same faith and the same body of Christ. Through the Lord's Supper in particular, Jesus reconciles us with God and one another.

The shield of faith is used to extinguish the flaming arrows that Satan hurls at you. Faith trusts in God, even when Satan tempts you to doubt.

Faith says, I am baptized, I am forgiven, I have received Jesus' own body and blood shed for me. God loves me and will never leave me.

Faith is gift, given by God through the Holy Spirit. Even with faith you don't rely on your own strength, but on the strength of God.

Your helmet is salvation. You are protected by the salvation that Jesus gives you. Nothing here on earth can destroy you, because you have an eternity of goodness and blessings awaiting you in the resurrection from the dead.

And finally your sword is the word of God. This isn't a long sword or a broadsword to go on the attack, but this word refers to a short sword, a dagger to use defensively if the enemy gets in close.

When Satan attacks, keep going back to God's Word. What does God really say? What does God tell you about Himself?

Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. Jesus is God's message to you. Do you want to know about God? Don't look to the stars or the heavens, don't look deep inside your heart, look to Jesus, look to the cross, look to the font, the pulpit and the altar. Here is where God speaks to you.

So be ready, be prepared because you don't know when Satan will attack. Have your armor on at all times. Don't say, I'll read God's Word when I have a question or need direction, you never know when you need to be ready.

The key component in all of this is prayer. Prayer is relying and trusting in God to keep you safe from Satan and all his attacks. Saying a prayer is like calling in the artillery, the airstrikes to

come to the rescue when the enemy seems to be prevailing, the reinforcements to come to the rescue. Prayer is admitting that you don't have the strength to prevail on your own, and asking for the Lord to give you the strength to resist Satan's attacks.

And pray for your fellow soldiers on the lines, for the rest of the saints, too. Pray for those who are particularly vulnerable. Pray for the weak and the poor, that they continue to trust in the Lord in difficult times. Pray for the rich and the strong, that they trust in the Lord even when it seems like they can make it on their own. Pray especially for the young, those who are venturing out on their own, that Satan does not separate them from the church and pick them off one by one.

Finally, Paul implores the Ephesians to pray for him. Pray for your pastors. They are there on the front lines, and they often are the focus of Satan's attacks. If Satan can get one pastor to give in to temptation, to abuse a child or commit adultery, to take advantage of those entrusted to him, or to fall away from the faith, that causes catastrophic damage to the church.

It is a difficult struggle, especially since we are fighting against the unseen, spiritual forces of evil. But Jesus arms you for the fight with his very self, with the truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and His own Word to stand firm against Satan. He is the one who gives us victory, and will bring us safely home.