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Ephesians 6.10-23
Nov 22, 2020

Becoming Who You Are: God's Strength to Endure

-Last summer, the boys and I climbed way up high on the east side of the Mission Mountain range to camp at Turquoise Lake. It was all blue sky when we arrived and set up our tent a bit above the lake. We met some folks who climbed even higher up a pinnacle of rock. They only brought hammocks and strung them up between craggy old trees at the top of the world.

Well you already know what happened. Just a few hours after we zipped ourselves into our tent and huddled in our sleeping bags, an enormous storm rolled in. The thunder made it feel as if we were about to explode. The flashes of light were blinding. And the winds thrashed at us with frightful force. We were so glad for our little tent. We sat up and hoped it would withstand the gale. We sat up and wondered what on earth those poor guys in hammocks would do. Completely exposed. With no preparation or protection. How would *they* withstand the wind?

-Today we come to the last sermon in this series on Ephesians about becoming our true selves, about growing up to maturity in the reality of Christ, about leading lives congruent with the calling to which we've been called.

And the context for our call to faithful maturity continues to be the windstorm of 2020. Death. Division. Disappointment. Disconnection. Isolation. Uncertainty. Loneliness. Exhaustion. Anger. Temptation.

It seems appropriate that Paul concludes his letter with a word of warning and hope for people of faith. A warning that we will battle fearsome forces of opposition. A word of hope about how we might withstand the storm. How we might remain standing through the struggle with evil itself.

As I read from this last passage in Ephesians, pay attention. Where will we follow Jesus Christ find the strength to stand firm?

[Read Ephesians 6.10-20]

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our^[b] 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. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these,^[c] take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ^[d] ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in cha

-‘Be strong in the Lord,’ Paul tells us. ‘Be strong in the strength of his power.’ Because there is a battle raging.

In the news of any given week: Assault. Adultery. Racism. Child abuse. Misuse of power. Insult. Divorce. Disinformation. Warfare. Corruption. Scandal. Swagger. Willful ignorance. That there is evil at work in the world is plain.

This passage describes a battle that is cosmic in nature. That involves not just human beings perpetrating profound and malicious wrong. But the powers of darkness at work on earth. The devil.

The word *devil* comes from the Greek *diablos* (as in diabolical). Notice the prefix is the same as in the word *divide*. That makes the devil *the splitter*. The one who drives a wedge between us and God. The one who splits us apart from the truth. The one who splits apart our relationships. The one who splits us apart from our God-made selves.

Sometimes by whispering temptation. Like the serpent in Genesis. Planting the seed of doubt, distrust, and division: ‘Did God *really* say you can’t have the fruit of that tree?’

-The battle is over authority. Who will be in charge? What values will be acknowledged supreme? Will it be the way of Jesus? Will it be costly faith, hope, and love? Will it be integrity and compassion? Or will it be the way of the world? An eye for an eye? Crushing people who may get in my way? Worshipping the idols of self and status and security.

-The affirmation of this last passage in Ephesians is that we who follow Christ will be attacked.

And the attack of evil is often far more subtle than the news stories. If only the devil were the obvious guy in a red suit with horns, a pointy tail and pitch fork. If only evil were always readily identifiable as a uniformed army arrayed against us on a clear front. Then maybe we would be prepared for the flaming arrows that come our way, seeking to burn down our faith, hope and love.

Instead we’re attacked by doubt or despair; by adverse circumstances; by sharp temptation (power, pleasure, popularity). We’re attacked by personal tragedy; or even by the kind of successes that tempt us to arrogance and pride.

These are the flaming arrows that come at us unexpectedly. And this passage warns us to expect them. What are they for you? What is attacking your faith? What forces are dividing you from God? Or from one another? Or from your best selves?

-Are you exhausted? Are you anxious? Are you angry? Are you taking up the equipment that God has given us to withstand the windstorm?

-The Scripture tells us not to be surprised when we're under attack. But to recall that we've been provided with protective armor.

It is our fellowship with God that gives us power over evil. We are meant to wear our relationship with Christ as protection. To take up his grace like body armor against temptation and discouragement. The belt of truth. The breastplate of righteousness. The gospel of peace for shoes. The helmet of salvation. The shield of faith to quench the flaming arrows that if we allow them to catch fire in us will burn us up. It's all there as a gift God gives for free. Like a pile of beautiful new tents and stakes and sleeping bags laid at the trailhead of our adventure. Not just words, but God-given protection.

-Now I do want to note the danger of militaristic imagery for Christian engagement in the battle with evil.

It has often been too easy for Christians to see evil as something out there beyond ourselves when the Bible calls us to look within. Think of the 'righteous' conquistadors who sailed the seas to 'convert' native Americans at sword point. Think of the so-called Christians who kidnapped Native children here in Montana to put them in boarding schools in order to 'Christianize' them. Think of what they were praying for. Believing they were good Christian soldiers while perpetrating grave evils.

It's too easy to justify violent words and deeds as the means to an end. As if Jesus calls us to do violence to our neighbor on behalf of his love. So this passage has to come with a warning. There is nothing more damaging to the truth of Christ than using weapons he refuses to use to 'fight' for it.

Note that the only 'weapon' listed by Paul is the sword of the spirit. The word of God. And what is the word? The gospel itself. The truth and grace of Jesus. Truth is sharp. It exposes wrongdoing. But it also refuses to fight back. Grace forgives. It heals. It gives life. Grace without truth is coddling. Truth without grace is condemning. In Jesus we have been given the Word of God, the fullness of grace and truth.

So how *do* we fight evil in the world?

I think the answer is that *We* don't, per se. Christ does. Jesus Christ strengthens us with defensive armor to endure the flaming arrows of opposition. He lives in us to undo evil. To call out evil for sure. But to eschew it's worldly weapons. It's an upside down strategy where what is seemingly weak and truthful and gracious overcomes what is seemingly strong and swaggering with scorn. Because evil is no match for love. Love wins every time. Even when we, like Jesus, win by losing the worldly battles on purpose.

- What will this mean for when you get up in the morning and prepare for your adventure into the mountains of the day? What will it mean as you prepare to withstand the winds?

I love what CS Lewis writes about the devil in his introduction to the Screwtape Letters, which is all about how evil tries to blow people of faith over. What Lewis says is that we who follow Christ should live in a tension. On the one hand, don't pay too *little* attention to the fact that there is a battle raging over who will win your heart. Be prepared. Bring a tent. When you wake up in the morning, take up the armor laid graciously at your bedside. Put on truth and faith and peace and salvation. That is, put on your fellowship with Christ as defensive armor. As shield and strength. The armor will not make you more anxious or weighed down. It will make you more gentle and free and lighthearted. Your defender is Love himself. So on this hand, pay attention to the schemes of the devil. And defend against them.

But on the other hand, don't pay too *much* attention to the fact that there is a battle raging either. There is no reason to go looking for the devil under every bush. Evil is no match for love. Take up the gospel Word. Read it. Carry it. Embody it by leading a life worthy of the calling to which you've been called. And Pray. The final tool is prayer. So on this hand, don't pay too much attention to the schemes of the devil. Live in the Word. Pray. And be at peace.

The Lord gives us plenty of armor. What speaks to you most today? I invite you to hear these words again and imagine: What is it that you can hear God inviting you to take up and put on put on or carry with you as he himself shields you against the windstorm?

¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, ¹⁶ take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.

So when I get up in the morning, I want to set my eyes on the truth of Christ, the one who defends me from defeat, and stand firm in his strength, striving to lead a live worthy of the calling to which I have been called. Today. In this place. With these people. In these circumstances.

Because the devil's power is unequal to the power of Christ and his love. The battle is already won. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.