

"Suit Up"
Ephesians
August 26, 2018

Gracious God,
may your messages and preaching come to us
through your Holy Spirit's power,
so that our faith might not rest
on the words of a preacher
or the abilities of the human mind,
but upon Your power and presence.
Open our minds, ears, eyes, and hearts
To the message you have for each of us today. Amen.

Today's text, from the letter Paul wrote to the Ephesians, is not, perhaps, a very popular choice for preachers. Now I can't make any assumptions about how each of you come to this text, but we all come to it differently. We all see it through glasses colored by our life experiences. Some of us might feel put off by what they see as militaristic or divisive words. Others may feel galvanized or even comforted by what they read as strengthening, encouraging words. For me, words like *evil*, *armor*, *enemies*, *devil*, and *stand against...* coming from the *BIBLE*, can literally make me cringe.

I could have decided not to preach on the suggested text for this Sunday. I could have gone with one of the United Church of Christ's favorites like Micah 6:8, "what does the lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with the Lord?" Or maybe John 13:34, "This new command I give to you: Love one another. As I have loved you so you should love one another." Or something equally lovely and peaceful and encouraging. Something placid. So why the armor of God?

Well, the short answer is that the more I got into the text, the more I saw that my initial reaction to it was unwarranted. There were two things that made this text hard to swallow for me, and as I read commentaries on Ephesians, I realized a lot of people had a hard time with the same two things.

First is the assumption that there is evil actively at work in our lives. Second, the military imagery of this text doesn't seem to fit with the positivity of the Good News that we're used to. So first, let's talk about the assumption of evil's existence.

It has been my experience that in most mainline protestant churches, perhaps especially in our denomination, there's not a lot of talk about evil or the devil. It's a little outdated, isn't it? That fire and brimstone

talk? I mean, who believes in the devil these days? That's the dismissive tone I've heard. Heck I've had that tone.

I think maybe one of the most damaging things we can do when it comes to our understanding of the devil, or of evil, is to imagine that they don't really exist. We cheapen the idea of the devil to a cartoonish red creature with a tail, horns, and a pitchfork. And we assume that to interact with this devil requires him to pop up in a puff of smoke and ask if we want to make a deal. Oh, wouldn't that be easy? We could see the devil coming from a mile away in his red pajamas and we could just say, "no thanks devil, whatever you're selling I'm good." Oh. So easy.

But the text says we have to be prepared for the *WILES* of the devil. The spiritual forces of evil. The cosmic powers of this dark age. That's a lot more nefarious, more abstract and sneaky. And a lot more intimidating.

Now Paul was talking to a specific community in a specific time. They were probably most concerned about the oppressive forces of the Roman empire. So we have to ask ourselves what the forces of evil are in *OUR* present age.

I can think of a few. I'm sure you can too. Child abuse. Willful ignorance in the face of a dying planet. The pursuit of ever greater wealth in a world where *9 million* people die of hunger every day. The rampant prejudgement and dismissal of people's basic humanity based on any number of trivial characteristics. Distorted love. Shame. Addiction. Deceit. Violence. Pick up a paper and tell me that evil doesn't exist. That there aren't forces at work whose aim is to make us forget that we are all loved and cared for by a powerful and gracious God.

And as for the flaming arrows of the devil mentioned so dramatically in this passage, what has life thrown at you? At your loved ones? Who hasn't felt as though they were under attack by life itself when one thing after another after another after another just keeps coming

So what do we do? Let's not be tempted, based on a first reading of this text, that we are called to fight. Because yes, this text implores us to take up the armor of God but it never says to fight. So let's take a closer look at this armor of God.

The belt of truth. The breastplate of righteous living. Shoes of peace. Shield of faith. Helmet of salvation. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith,

and salvation. These are the armor of God, which we can take on for ourselves. We'll get to the sword in a moment, but each and every one of these is a defensive element of armor. With these, one can stand against the wiles of the devil, withstand all evil, and when those flaming arrows of outrageous fortune just keep coming, this armor allows you to stand despite it all.

In the face of all this life has to throw at us, that, is, encouraging.

Now to the sword. This is indeed the most dangerous element of the text. The idea that we are to arm ourselves with the word of God.

[cringe]

It worries me because How often has the word of God been used to demoralize, shame, condemn, chastise, and judge? When I think of someone arming themselves with the word of God as with a sword, I am deeply skeptical that it could be a good thing.

My pastor growing up said that the Bible should never be used to close a discussion, but only to open one. I stand firm in my conviction that the Bible is not a weapon, but a resource. A beautiful, living document with the power to bring new life and light into your life, when you read it with an open heart.

A sword is something you can pick up, hold, poses, grasp. Yet the Bible, woah, it's bigger than us. It slips through our fingers. It changes. Every time we think we have a grasp on it, we find out something new. How can we arm ourselves with the word of God without claiming (falsely) that we have a firm and conclusive grasp of it?

Well, the answer to that comes in the last bit of this letter. Paul ends this letter to the Ephesians by urging prayer in all things at all times. See with all of this imagery of this epic spiritual battle and all that we can put on to defend ourselves, we have to be careful not to assume that we are always right, always on the right side, weilding the right tools in the way God intends. We don't know everything. We are not God. And so the author, having strengthened and prepared us to continue this struggle of life, reminds us not to forget the all-important prayer.

When we suit up, we are in danger of putting on certainty and arrogance. PRAYER, however, is our safeguard.

In prayer we open our hearts. By praying we acknowledge that there is a God, and that God is more powerful than we are. God is God, and we are not. That humbleness is our most important guard. It keeps us

from turning truth into certainty, righteousness into judgement against others. It reminds us to ground ourselves in and come from a place of peace rather than seeking battle. It reminds us to hold firm to faith, without letting faith slip into complacency. Prayer reminds us that we are already saved and loved and need not vainly prove ourselves. And with prayer, we get the most out of the word of God.

Can you imagine just how different the world would be, if we really carried with us these tools of God? Can you imagine, how we might remedy some of the wrongs of this world, if we carried with us always, in prayer, the whole armor of God?

Confrontation is a part of life and we all enter into it. We all need it. We grow when we confront circumstances, newly revealed truths, the ebb and flow of life, the perspective of other human beings with different viewpoints. We can grow from conflict if we approach it with openness. Yet our tendency is to be defensive. To hold tightly to what we believe to be right, and to push away what threatens that. We tend, in those moments, to arm ourselves with clever arguments, harsh words, self-righteous indignation, certainty, and dismissiveness. But can you imagine, if we, if I, if you instead armed yourself with, an openness to new information (truth), an assumption of positive intent

(righteousness), a genuine desire for peace, a faith that is strong without being inflexible, a sense of self that is rooted in our salvation and not vain arrogance, and the openness of heart that comes from prayer?

Can you imagine?

So suit up, with those mighty tools, and please don't forget Paul's warning, that we do not fight against enemies of flesh and blood. Our enemies are not people. Let me repeat that, because I think it's extremely important to remember in the polarized climate we live in: *our enemies are not people*. Our enemies, as Paul puts it, are the controlling cosmic powers of darkness and evil. They not they people we disagree with. They are all those elements of evil we talked about before: Abuse. Ignorance. Greed. Distorted love. Shame. Addiction. Deceit. Violence. Our enemies are not the *people* who enact these elements, but the very elements themselves. Things that each and every human being falls victim to.

So to end I give you this challenge: suit up, with the whole armor of God, and encounter a conflict differently, with the whole armor of God in mind.

I'm not going to ask you to go and fight the greatest evils of our world. You can, absolutely, go for it. But MY ask is a little more bite sized. I challenge each of you, to Intentionally seek out something that will challenge your understandings, your beliefs. Listen to the viewpoint of someone you disagree with. Research an opinion you heard on the news that you would really love to dismiss outright. Find a story from the life of a person, the likes of which you have never met.

Go. Listen. Learn. What have you to fear, when you have use of the whole armor of God?

In the name of the one who goes with us, our companion and our guide Jesus, Amen.