

I do hope that you have found this sermon series, which concludes today, relating the insights of the Letter to the Ephesians to our vision and mission as a church, to be helpful, informative, encouraging, maybe even a little inspiring. All three of us who have preached – Art, John and myself – tried to point out the connections between the scriptures and our resolve to live out our church's mission expressed in the term: WORDS – Worship, Outreach, Relationships, Discipleship and Support. I trust all 700-1000-2000 of you who have participated in worship over these weeks in person, or via the CN2 program have likewise been able to see and make these connections.

Today's passage in the sixth chapter, about the whole armor of God, is a summation of the entire Ephesians Letter. A passage about being strong in the Lord, standing firm, accepting the whole armor of God that we might love and serve God is certainly very appropriate for this Rally Day 2009. Not that the church goes away or stops over the summer but Rally Day is a day when we are reminded of so much of whose we are and whom it is we serve.

Rally Day is a great opportunity to get better connected, more fully involved, and more deeply committed to the work of God in and through this church. This fact and the obvious needs that I see for additional and expanded help in several areas of ministry and mission is why you have in your bulletin today a gold postcard – one simple way in which you can let us know of your willingness to serve and volunteer, if you complete and return the postcard telling us you want to be involved, we will be back with you to offer some places where you will be able to make a difference!

It was 1996 when Janice and I and the children arrived in the United States as new immigrants. We had only been in Roswell GA for two weeks when young Jim who was then just 8 years old, took a tumble off a bicycle and as we later discovered, broke his wrist. Since I was pastoring a church the family had Health Insurance through the Board of Pensions of the PC(USA) but we did not have any proof of Insurance, no Benefit cards, nothing and our good friends knew that taking Jim to the Emergency Room would be a whole new experience for us and so offered to come with us to help us navigate the intricacies of the system. In the course of the next four hours we were grateful for their help - one of the hospital staff members hearing that we were very new to the USA asked them where we were from and how long had we been in America. They told them we were from Scotland and that we had only been here two weeks – the staff person – a medical professional's response was, "They have only been here two weeks – their English is very good!"

This little story is relevant to today's reading in Ephesians which offers two different languages, two types of talk. There is talk about the body armor of a Roman soldier and there is talk about God-given gifts and virtues such as truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit and the word of God, and prayer. Too often throughout history the Church has been overly obsessed with the drama and the temptation of armor and strength and power that the focus has been on the talk about combat and warfare when it should have been focused on the way this passage talks about what is higher and greater and of lasting value – such things as truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit and the word of God, and prayer.

Even in the description of the individual elements of the whole armor – the whole armor of God, described in this passage all relate back to and express elements already laid out earlier in the letter without any link to armor, but with link to the activity of God. The TRUTH belt is connected to the call to "speak the truth in love" to one another in Chapter 4. The RIGHTEOUSNESS breastplate

relates to the "new self" by which we are to clothe ourselves according to the righteous and holy likeness of God— again Chapter 4. The PEACE gospel, for which we are to put on our shoes ready to share the gospel of peace expresses the action required by the affirmation in Chapter 2 that in reconciling Jews and Gentiles into one body, Christ "is our peace". The FAITH shield and SALVATION helmet tie back to the assertion in Chapter 1 that faith activates the power of God and the stress that salvation is God's gift, through faith that we find in Chapter 3. Praying as an activity connected to the wearing of God virtues echoes what we read in Chapter 3 when prayer was offered that the church might have strength and understanding, and elsewhere the church was urged to pray for all of the saints and for the author of the letter.

In the first century time-period out of which this Ephesians Letter originates the Roman authorities, the Roman soldiers, the Roman Army was no friend to the small, weak, politically disconnected Christian community. After all the Romans had helped send Jesus to the Cross and often been very quick to isolate, punish and persecute the community that bore the name of Jesus. Within the Church itself, there was, at that time, a settled view that Christians ought not to serve in the Roman Legions. For such reasons it is certain that the readers of this letter were never intended to directly equate the strength, power and violence of the legions of Rome with the call to stand firm, be courageous, as followers of Jesus Christ. The one and only reason that the image of the armor is mentioned in this passage is so that readers of the letter will focus on what last: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit and the word of God, and prayer, not so that readers will be blinded by naked power, authority and the threat or use of violence.

As we have seen over the preceding weeks, Ephesians has been all about personal empowerment out of deep and growing relationship to Christ. This personal empowering, based on all Christ achieved, is never about conquest or destruction or division, instead our call in Christ, to stand firm and resolute in Christ is all about reconciliation and love, the overcoming and ending of barriers, the seeking, the sharing, the making of peace and hope.

The result of all this is quite intriguing. Armor, usually a symbol of self-reliance, is transformed into a symbol of utter dependence on God. The armor is not a sign of our strength as believers, instead it is a sign that we need God, and that we need God absolutely. If you were to press me to posit what image might be used if the letter to the Ephesians was being written today I might suggest two – a deep-sea diver or an Astronaut. Both of them have various special component parts to their equipment – helmets, shoes, visors, protective garments. Both the diver and the astronaut require such equipment to stand firm, to endure, to survive in the very harshest of conditions. In addition, most importantly, both of them have an umbilical cord that connects them to life. These cords of life remind us of their utter dependence on their source of life – on the dive ship or the mother ship.

When we hear that we are to be strong in the Lord, to put on the whole armor, to receive and wear all the gifts of God, to stand, to withstand, to stand firm, to proclaim the gospel of peace, these injunctions are in line with the thrust of the entire letter. Standing in Christ's shoes, we are not to reach out to people to strike them or to push them away, rather we are to offer to them and bring to them the fullness of God's goodness.

Now, are there forces at work, forces which stand in direct opposition to God's good news and which are bigger than simply what individual human beings do? Yes there are, but those forces are not only

found "out there" or in other people. The truth is, even as we have read the earlier chapters in this Letter, these destructive forces are found even within the church itself – in division or pride or lack of faithfulness, let's admit it, these destructive forces exist in all who believe, and when it comes right down to it, these destructive forces even exist in us, right here, right now.

Having acknowledged that this is so what are we to do? Are we to merely bemoan this fact? Are we to explain this away or seek to justify who we are? Are we to say well we don't find it easy to change? Are we to argue that at least we are a whole lot better than some folks?

None of these responses is what the scripture passage we are considering today, nor the whole thrust of our Reformed/Presbyterian faith would suggest. The truth, my friends, is all together more amazing, more challenging, more troubling – the response that we are invited make is to do something that goes against the grain for every human being, we are asked to do something that goes especially against the grain of the type and sort of people we are – educated, with opportunities and potential, people who have often been told to do our best and to be all we can be! We are asked to acknowledge, admit and practice that we are utterly dependant on God – that on our own we cannot do what needs to be done, on our own we have failed and will fail, on our own we are screwed, on our own we are lost, on our own we will end up "on our own" far away from the love and grace of God, on our own we cannot reach up into the light of God's presence. But there is a vital alternative as we offer our whole selves over to the God who in Jesus came crashing into our shadows!

This past week I read some reflections on this passage from David Cameron, pastor of Rockfish Presbyterian Church. He said this, "The shoes of the gospel of peace interest me. My son has autism and doesn't speak, so much of the communication in our house is non-verbal. When my wife and I come down each morning the first thing my son does is check our shoes. He's learned that the shoes we have on speak volumes about the kind of day we have planned. Dress shoes mean work. Scuffed slippers mean a casual, more relaxed day around the house. In his book, *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner writes, "If you want to know who you really are as distinct from who you like to think you are, keep an eye on where your feet take you."

Being utterly dependant on God where will your shoes, my shoes, our shoes take us today, this week, this month, this fall, this Church year?

Which calendar will we allow to set our priorities in life, will it be one the features the Tigers or the Gamecocks or the Eagles or will it be the calendar of the mission and ministry of our church?

Which paths will we walk, will they be on a golf course or around a lake or the path to worship and service?

Which house will we inhabit, our home or our lake house or our mountain cabin or the house of worship?

Will we expend our energy at the gym or the tennis court or the mall or in God's service?
On what will we spend our money? On what will we focus? On whom will we think day and night?

Okay preacher we get the point! And, yes, you are right, none of these things that I have held out to you today as “not the best choices” are in themselves fully wrong - except that little by little, we allow ourselves, especially because we have so many opportunities, little by little we allow ourselves to drift or move just a little bit farther away from where we need to be – that place where we know for sure that we are utterly dependent upon God.

If you were here last Sunday you will recall the shepherd in my story, that shepherd could tell you that sheep just nibble themselves lost, they keep their heads down, wander from one green tuft to another, until they have lost sight of the flock. They just nibble themselves lost!

God's armor, God's Dress Code: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit and the word of God, and prayer is what we are to put on so we don't get lost, so we don't wander off, so we can stand firm, so we can serve, so we can live faithfully, so we can be a church all-living and all-loving. People of God, this is God's Dress Code, God's Good news for us on this Rally Day, God's Good news for us now and forever. Amen.