

Michael J. Mathey
Pentecost XV & Proper 17
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Text: Ephesians 6:10 – 20
Title: Battle Gear

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. In today's world, the idea of evil being active is something that we tend to ignore or to outright deny altogether. The possibility of demon possession has become the stuff of Hollywood story-lines, and something that is comparable to modern day mythology because of it. In spite of the examples of possession and torment that we read about in the Bible, Christians today usually don't consider demonic activity as a reality anymore. Yet in the Lutheran churches in Africa, the pastors find themselves performing exorcisms as a regular part of their weekly worship. But it's not just something that happens in other countries. Evil is alive and well in this country as well.

We see evil every time there's another report of a senseless shooting somewhere in the country. Evil is evident in the callous way that people ignore the suffering of others around them who have little to nothing. There is evil in the many and various ways that God's Word is twisted and distorted to justify all manner of sins.

The struggle against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms is also a very real thing, and it is also something that Christians try to ignore these days. That probably happens because so many things that have been attributed to demonic activity in the past have been explained away by science and medicine. And while there is no question that many of these explanations and diagnoses are real, there is no way of telling how many of those incidents and suffering people might be caused by spiritual problems.

It's hard to determine where the line might be between the world that we can see and observe, and the heavenly realm that we know is there but can't see. Medical science has given us

some great ways to treat mental illnesses and chemical imbalances in individuals, but it's far from perfect. The charge of being superstitious is one that has been leveled against Christians over the past 200 years of scientific advances, and that charge has made the spiritual warfare that the Church is supposed to be fighting even more difficult. There is no fight that is harder than one where the enemy isn't obvious, just look at how difficult it has been to wage war against terrorism. The struggle against spiritual evil crosses the two kingdoms that Christians live in according to our Lutheran understanding.

On one hand, we are citizens of this worldly kingdom with all of its imperfections and problems from crime and corruption to natural disasters. We call it the kingdom of the left. This is the kingdom that orders our everyday lives with laws, and tries to enforce those laws with things such as police and courts. The kingdom of the left is supposed to provide government and good order. The kingdom of the left is made up of the entire world whatever country a person may live in, but it also includes those things that are hostile to the Christian faith, including many worldly governments as we are seeing more and more each day.

The second kingdom is only made up of those who have faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior. We call it the kingdom of the right. The kingdom of the right is where God comes to us and shows us His mercy and love. He provides everything that we need for salvation in this kingdom, and He promises us that He will forgive our sins for the sake of His Son, Jesus. The kingdom of the right is where we are given His gifts of Word and Sacraments to strengthen our faith for life in this world.

Today's Epistle reading from Ephesians gives us a look at just one of the many things that are involved in being a citizen of the kingdom of the right. The reading starts at verse 10 of chapter 6, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh

and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” As citizens of the right kingdom, we are part of the army of the Lord, and we’re called to join in the battle against the spiritual forces of evil. That’s part of being one of the Lord’s saints.

Unfortunately, we are also sinners, and that means that we essentially commit treason and rebel against the Lord instead of fighting the real enemies. Your sinful nature doesn’t want to fight the rulers, authorities and powers of evil in the heavenly places, instead your sinful nature fights against the Lord God and His will so that it can be in control. To your sinful nature God is your enemy. It persuades you to embrace your real enemies of sin, death and the power of the devil, deadly enemies that are very cunning and subtle.

Whenever you place anything – and I do mean anything from work or recreation to family or personal time – ahead of your relationship with Christ you will find yourself allied with the enemy. When you fail to do what the Ten Commandments demand of you in any way – such as holding God’s word sacred and gladly hearing *and learning* it – then you are rebelling against the rule of the Lord and you are in league with His enemies. Or if you ignore evil as it takes place in front of you – such as not condemning a blatant sin – then you have joined the enemy.

As a soldier of the Lord’s army, you can do nothing but plead guilty. You commit treason by allowing all kinds of things to distract you from your relationship with Him. You are guilty of dereliction of duty because you’ve sinned against Him by what you’ve left undone. And you and I are also guilty of giving aid and comfort to the enemy by allowing evil and immoral acts to flourish in front of us without doing anything to even contradict them, such as standing up to our friends and family and telling them that they shouldn’t be gossiping behind someone’s back or failing to take a firm stand on the important moral issues of our day. Or we fail to make our voices heard as the

world attacks the Lord and His Church with policies and laws that inhibit the work of the Gospel. With soldiers like us, it's nothing short of a miracle that we have not been slaughtered already.

And a miracle, that is an act of God, is precisely the reason why we haven't been slaughtered yet. Our Lord knew that if the battle was left to us, then this world was completely and totally without hope. He had to intervene, and intervene He did. When the time was exactly right, the Son of God Himself came into His creation as a tiny baby to do battle with His enemies. He defeated sin and the devil by being perfect and by resisting temptation with His greatest weapon, the Word of God. Jesus fought the good fight, and Jesus defeated sin, death and the devil decisively by rising from the grave on Easter Sunday.

His resurrection not only defeated death that one time, but did it for all people for all time. His sacrifice on the cross paid the penalty for the sins of the whole world, including every sin that you have ever committed and will ever commit. His victory on the cross has guaranteed victory for all of us who have been claimed by Him through Holy Baptism, and because of the Lord's work even our treasonous acts are forgivable because of His love and mercy.

Of course, that doesn't mean that all of our troubles are over just because we have faith in Jesus Christ. If that were the case, then there would be no battle to be concerned about. These words in Ephesians were originally written to people who were already Christians, and they still apply to us Christians today as well. The rest of today's epistle reading helps us with the battle now that Jesus has ascended to His throne at the Father's right hand. But He has not left us completely helpless ever since then.

The Lord sent His Holy Spirit to strengthen and keep us. It is through the Spirit's work that the Lord gives you your faith and His gifts. It is through the Spirit that you can do as Paul says and "...put on the whole armor of God." With His armor you will be able to stand firm against the

assaults of all of the enemies. The armor that He's given you will protect you and help you to fight back. Through the work of the Holy Spirit you are provided with everything that you need and even more.

The Holy Spirit equips us with a belt of truth and a breastplate of righteousness as well as shoes to protect our feet and make us ready by the Gospel of peace. To add to our protection, the Lord gives us the shield of faith which will extinguish the flaming darts that are shot at us by the enemy, and He also invites us to "...take up the helmet of salvation and fight with the sword of the Spirit that is the word of God."

The Lord provides us with everything that we need so that we can hold out against our enemies until He returns to end the war with the final battle. Until Jesus does return, He brings us together each week to be re-equipped through His Word and Sacraments, and when we are wounded, He brings us here for healing as well. We receive truth and the gospel when His Word is preached and taught among us. We are made righteous when we are absolved of our sins and when we receive the Lord's Supper, and our faith is strengthened and renewed and healed as the Lord serves us throughout His Divine Service. The Lord uses our times of worship to prepare us for the everyday battles that we face, and He encourages us to stand firm with Him as our champion each and every day.

So stand firm and use the gifts that God has given to you. Pray for strength and endurance, and pray for the pastors that He has given to His church to equip you with His armor. Ask that He work through them to proclaim His word to you, and ask Him to work through you so that you might share His Word and gifts with all of those in your life who are struggling so hard and so unsuccessfully to fight the enemies with their own feeble strength and clumsy skill. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.