6-27/28-20 Be Strong in the Lord Rev. Amy Haines

Eph 6:10-20 Armor Up Series

Certain occasions call for certain clothing. Would you wear muddy clothes to a wedding, or a tuxedo to mow the lawn? Would you want to play baseball in firefighter gear, or wear a winter coat at the beach in summer?

Certain sports call for certain gear. A tennis ball is not good to play soccer; neither is a volleyball good for ice hockey. You would not want to make a tackle in a swimsuit; competitive cheer would look strange in football pads.

Military members must also have the correct gear and uniform depending on their location and responsibility during deployment. Kevlar vests might be good in Iraq but not so much on a submarine. Dress uniforms may be practical when meeting heads of state but are not practical when on patrol.

Having the right gear in sports can be the difference between health and injury.

Having the right gear in war can often be the difference between life and death.

Have you ever considered there is also proper attire for the daily journey of our Christian faith?

And many of us will try and face each day without the full uniform of God?

The apostle Paul, in his final words to the church at Ephesus, encouraged those early Christians to wear the uniform of God, described in today’s passage as the armor of God.

“Stand with the belt of truth around your waist, justice as your breastplate,

and put shoes on your feet so that you are ready to spread the good news of peace.

Above all, carry the shield of faith so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one.

Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God’s word.”

(14-17 CEB)

Over the next six weeks, our summer sermon series will encourage us to wear the armor of God as we explore how God’s armor was lived out in the stories of our faith ancestors. How did they live by truth and justice, by peace and salvation, by faith and prayer? How do their stories encourage our faith journeys today?

The stories we will explore come from this year’s virtual Vacation Bible School, “Knights of the North Castle.” As the children will review these stories later in July, I invite all of us, young and old alike, to also learn these stories, so that we are all armored up to follow Jesus and serve in His name.

The armor of God is unlike the Kevlar vests of today’s military or the metal suits of medieval knights or the heavy gear of a catcher in baseball. Those uniforms physically cover a person to protect them.

God’s armor spiritually protects us, through characteristics and qualities that are God’s ways of living. God’s armor is seen in our actions, in the ways we live into and live out our identity as followers of Jesus in the community of faith, the body of Christ.

Truth- Justice- Peace- Faith- Salvation- Prayer

These are the ways of God we are called to live by today. These are God’s armor given to protect us and guide us in the spiritual battle of everyday life.

This is not the battle of the desert sands or of the streets; this is not a battle against one another in the many ways we divide ourselves in society nowadays; no, this is a greater battle, a battle for our souls, a battle that is against the evil and darkness that daily surrounds us.

As Ephesians 6:12 is translated in The Message:

“This is not an afternoon athletic contest that we’ll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-and-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.”

The CEB translation proclaims:

“We aren’t fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens.”

Turn on the news on any given night, reflect on all that is happening in 2020, and we cannot deny the struggles that surround us.

The ways we devalue one another.

Greed and selfishness running rampant.

Fear of the known and the unknown.

The challenge for the church to share a relevant word of grace.

Again, we are not called to fight against one another, but against the systemic powers of darkness and evil in our world.

We may think all of our struggles are new. But they’re not. They are just taking new forms in this new year.

Life has always had its share of challenges and unexpected detours. Followers of Jesus have always lived in tension with a counter-cultural message of hope and grace, of love and forgiveness, of transformation and community.

So Paul’s words to the early church in Ephesus are still words to us today.

“Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.”  (v10 NRSV)

Paul reminds us today that we cannot live by ourselves, and by our own strength. How many of our struggles in 2020 come from us trying to live in isolation from one another, doing our own thing and not caring about one another? How many of our struggles in 2020 come from us trying to live by our strength and our abilities, ignoring the gifts of those around us and most importantly, God’s presence with us?

“Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.”  (v10 NRSV)

This is good news! We don’t have to live life by ourselves! We don’t have to struggle to live only by our own power! God is with us! Our strength comes from the Lord: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

“Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.”  (v10 NRSV)

This invitation to live into God’s strength and not our own is an ongoing invitation, to continually receive God’s power, to continually rely on God’s strength rather than our own.

..Poet Maya Angelou recalls the struggles of her grandmother living through the great depression. She remembers a lot of things about her grandmother: her wisdom, her stature.

But it was her grandmother's faith that Maya remembers most. Clasping her hands behind her back her grandmother would look up into the distant sky and say, "I will step out on the word of God."

The great depression was a difficult time for everyone, but "especially so for a single black woman in the South tending her crippled son and two grandchildren." But when faced with mountainous burdens, Maya's grandmother would face the sky and say, "I will step out on the word of God."

"She would look up as if she could will herself into the heavens," Maya writes.

And because of her grandmother, Maya Angelou grew up knowing that the word of God had power. Whenever she experienced the injustices of this world, Maya would remember the great faith of her grandmother.

God gives us spiritual armor to protect us from the evil we face daily: He gives us truth, righteousness, the willingness to speak up for Christ, and, most importantly, faith.

--King Duncan, Sermons.com

Yet it is our choice whether or not we will put on the uniform of God. It is our choice whether we will take up the armor of God as our protection. It is our choice whether or not we will live by faith.

Charles Lawless once wrote:

“The essence of putting on the armor is living daily in truth, righteousness, faith, and hope, while always being ready to proclaim the gospel of peace found in the Word. Moreover, daily putting on and utilizing the armor is an essential element of the believer’s process of becoming like Jesus—the goal of biblical discipleship. Putting on the armor includes developing character, meeting ethical demands, exhibiting personal holiness, preparing for witnessing, studying the Bible, and focusing on prayer. This process is not about mystical prayer that magically applies the weaponry to believers’ lives each day. Rather, it is about discipleship and spiritual growth that affect all of one’s life. Wearing the armor is about daily living as a follower of Christ.

--Charles Lawless, “Spiritual Warfare & Evangelism” sbts.edu, 2001

Paul invites us to take up, to put on the armor of God with a goal to stand firm.

Notice that the armor of God, much like the armor of the ancient Roman legions, is defensive in nature rather than offensive, except the sword that is the word of God and the power of prayer.

God is not clothing us to go out and conquer others in his name through threats and killings, through intimidation and division. Rather, God is clothing us to stand firm against any assaults that come our way, defending the home turf of our hearts and minds and souls against the devil and any who would turn us away from God. God is clothing us to face whatever comes our way, and to stand in the strength of his presence and his power.

God is also inviting us to stand firm together. The gifts of the armor of God are not gifts for our individual use. Every “you” in today’s Scripture is actually an “all ya’ll.”

“Put on the whole armor of God, so that all ya’ll may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” (v11)

Like the ancient Roman legions, one of the best gifts of God’s armor is one another. Roman soldiers not only strapped on their gear when they were making a stand; they also stood shoulder to shoulder, a wall of strength that was hard to defeat. They were protected best when facing the enemy together.

As followers of Christ, we are called to stand together; we are called together to proclaim the gospel of peace. We are called to pray for one another; we are called to learn together;

we are called to support one another; we are called to witness together.

While each one of us is individually equipped with the uniform of God, when we stand together we are stronger together, and when we are stronger together we will find it easier to move forward together in love.

Our victory comes when we stand firm in faith together. When we remain in the battle, not giving up or giving in to the darkness around us. When we remain in conversation with one another, open to honoring one another’s stories. When we continue to be that light in the darkness, offering hope to a world in despair. When we love God and love neighbor, refusing to let hate and evil win.

Joyce Meyer actually said it best:

“Loving people is the highest level of spiritual warfare that we could ever do.”

-Joyce Meyer “The Cane Fu Defense” 8-26-18 homileticsonline.com

Are you willing to join me this summer in taking up the challenge to armor up--

To rely on God strength as our strength,

To put on God’s ways as our ways,

To be present with and for one another,

To love as God loves?

Are you willing to clothe yourselves in God’s armor, God’s ways, in order to stand firm on our daily journeys of faith?

Truth- Justice- Peace- Faith- Salvation- Prayer

God invites us to put on the armor of God.

Over the next six weeks may we learn more about God’s ways, God’s uniform, God’s characteristics that we are called to take on as our own. And in so doing, may we find strength in the Lord and the strength of his power.

God guide us to make it so.

Amen.