8-8/9-20 Armor Up with Prayer Rev. Amy Haines

Eph 6:10-20 Armor Up Series

Vacation Bible School may be over, yet one last time today we are called to armor up!

For the past five weeks, we have been called to armor up with Truth- Justice- Peace- Faith- Salvation. Today, we are called to armor up with Prayer.

We are not putting on literal armor; instead we are invited to put on God’s armor, God’s ways, God’s characteristics as our own, in order to stand strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

One last time, hear the invitation to armor up from Ephesians 6:

“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.”

 -Eph 6:14-17 CEB

Although not listed, I believe there is one more piece of armor in this passage, the armor of prayer.

“Offer prayers and petitions in the Spirit all the time.

Stay alert by hanging in there and praying for all believers.” -v18 CEB

These are God’s ways to stand firm in faith in the battle for our souls. Each and every day,

there is a battle that seeks to pull us away from faith in Christ, a battle that emphasizes our sins over our forgiveness; a battle that draws us away from living by love for God and love for one another.

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.”

Each day, we are faced with moments in which we need to make a choice. Each day, we are faced with moments in which we need to stand firm in faith, or give in to the temptation around us.

Will we make a decision that seems like a moral compromise? Will we stand up or stay silent against racism or sexism or ageism? Will we set boundaries for our households that are at odds with the culture around us? Will we give in to the ease of little lies that question our integrity?

Will we adapt our priorities so faith growth is no longer important?

Each day, we are challenged to stand firm in faith. Yet we do not have to stand firm in our own power. God invites us to stand in the strength of his power! His truth! His grace! His ways!

Catherine Taylor muses about the challenge to stand firm in God’s power when she writes:

We live in an era and in a nation which is deluded by the notion that everything is up to us. We choose what to do and where to go and what to say. Yet to be baptized or to join a church is to stand up and heckle that idea.

Whenever people gather around a baptismal font, they publicly proclaim that they rely on a power beyond themselves, that they believe in God whose love and strength sustains them in all things, that they trust in God to guide them where they may not want to go.

 --Catherine Taylor “Power Source” 6-1-03 day1.org adapted

We do have a choice whether or not to put on God’s armor, whether or not to stand firm in faith with God’s ways, even though we have pledged time and again to do so as people of faith, beginning in the waters of baptism.

Today, God once more invites us to put on his ways as our ways, his armor as our armor.

Most of God’s armor is defensive in nature. There are two pieces, however, that are more offensive in nature, the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, and the power of prayer.

These two go hand in hand; God’s Word guides us deeper in prayer, opening our eyes to the needs around us, and prayer assists us to discern God’s Word in order to live by God’s ways.

These are not meant to be offensive in the sense of berating or judging or blaming others.

Rather, these are offensive in that they move us forward in faith, living into an unknown future trusting a known God.

The Roman sword was used primarily in the context of close, hand to hand fighting. How often are our deepest struggles within us, or among us? We doubt the truth of God’s love. We listen to the lies of the devil. We second guess how we are living by faith.

When we take up the Word of God as the Sword of the Spirit, we are taking on God’s living words that protect us and guide us. As we have reflected on the stories of our faith ancestors these past five weeks, through the Word of God we learn how to put on God’s ways.

As Bishop Carter reminds us:

..As we read scripture, we become aware of the armor that we need. We also can only know ourselves—our strengths and our weaknesses, our gifts and our limitations—by reading the scripture. We can only know our world—its beauty and its terror, its goodness and its evil—by reading the scripture. We would not go into warfare without knowing as much as possible about our own resources and about the enemy. In the same way, we proceed in the spiritual life only as we avail ourselves of the resources God has given to us, and these are revealed to us in the Scriptures. -Bishop Kenneth Carter “Spiritual Warfare” 9-8-11 adapted

The Word of God teaches us who and whose we are, and teaches us the ways of the one we are called to follow, the ways of Jesus.

One of Jesus’ foundational practices was prayer. Jesus often armored up with prayer. And as his followers, we are called to do likewise.

..Read through the Gospel of Luke, for example, and you will find Jesus praying consistently at every turn in his life. He prays as he senses God's call on his life; He prays before choosing his disciples; He prays as he serves and heals other people; He prays as he feels the demands and pressures of his ministry; He prays as he faces the cross; He prays as he finishes his work on the cross.

Jesus is continually praying. You could say that prayer for him was as vital as taking his next breath. He knew that in order to live out the life God called him to live, he needed to be continually connected to God in prayer; God was the source of his power.

-- Charles Reeb day1.org 9-17-05

Jesus prayed all the time. And the disciples noticed. Then they requested Jesus teach them to pray. And Jesus taught them what we now call The Lord’s Prayer.

The late Bishop Reuben Job once wrote:

..It appears that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them only one thing. They must have known there was much they did not know about being a disciple and bearing witness to the gospel.

And yet, they asked Jesus to teach them just one thing: how to pray. Was it because it was such a difficult thing to learn how to pray? Or, was it that they saw it was the essential practice, the center of power, the ultimate source of companionship, the connection to the loving Abba that Jesus loves, listened to, and obeyed?

…The disciples wanted what Jesus had and wanted to be like Jesus and wanted to live like Jesus.

And they could see that there was only one way to receive that gift, and it was through prayer.

 -adapted from Bishop Reuben Job, “When You Pray” Week 39, “Teach Us to Pray” p162

Today, the final piece of armor we are called to put on is the power of prayer.

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* translates v.17-20 to read:

“God’s Word is an *indispensable* weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other’s spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.

And don’t forget to pray for me. Pray that I’ll know what to say and have the courage to say it at the right time, telling the mystery to one and all, the Message that I, jailbird preacher that I am, am responsible for getting out.”

We are called to-

Pray in the Spirit

Pray at all times

Pray for other believers

Pray for a bold witness

I know it’s hard right now, to be armored up with prayer, to be praying hard and long.

We’re weary. We’re worn out. We’re yearning for what once was, and fearful of what is yet to come. We find it hard to pray without the gathered community of faith. We find it hard to pray without hope of an end in sight for the pandemic. We find it hard to pray when overwhelmed with so many needs for prayers.

Yet we are not the first to face struggles, the first to be challenged, the first to be scattered.

Paul wrote his letters to the churches from prison! So, like our faith ancestors, we are called to stand firm in faith, in trust, in hope, and in prayer.

We are not called to pray out of our own strength, but to pray in the Spirit. To pray, trusting in the power of God to guide and answer our prayers.

When we pray in the Spirit, as Romans 8 proclaims:

“The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought,

but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”  -Rm 8:26 NRSV

When we pray in the Spirit, we are less likely to treat God as Santa Claus or a vending machine, demanding that our selfish prayers get answered, or insisting on answers that are not the way of God.

When we pray in the Spirit, we pray trusting that God hears us, God loves us, and God is still with us, no matter the answer or lack of answer to our prayer.

When we armor up with prayer, not only do we pray in the Spirit, but we also pray at all times.

1 Thessalonians reminds us to “pray without ceasing.” 5.17 NRSV

Praying without ceasing keeps our souls always alert to the world around us and its needs, opportunities and dangers.

The more we pray to God, the more we begin to understand God’s ways.

The more we pray to God, the more we open ourselves up to God’s ways in our lives.

The more we pray to God, the more we become aware of the world around us.

The more we pray to God, the more we hear God calling us to care for one another.

When was the last time you earnestly prayed for one another? I’m not talking simply about our supplication, our praises and prayers shared throughout the week. Those are important, to celebrate and to mourn and to lift up healing prayers. But here I’m asking, when was the last time you prayed for one another to stand firm in faith, to be open to the Spirit, to grow in faith? When was the last time you prayed for one another to have a bold witness, to shine the light of Christ throughout your lives?

When we armor up with prayer, we are called to-

Pray in the Spirit

Pray at all times

Pray for other believers

Pray for a bold witness

Pastor Edward Markquart learned how to armor up with prayer from his mother. He now recites the prayer she used to recite at the beginning of every day:

“O God, this morning I come into the stillness of your presence to begin this day with you, so that out of this moment, I may take with me a quiet serenity and strength to last me all day long. I have come to find wisdom, so I do not make any foolish mistakes. I have come to find peace, so that nothing would worry or upset me all through today. I have come to find love so that nothing would make me bitter, unforgiving or unkind. I have come to find justice, so that I would always work for the poor and disadvantaged in the world. I have come to begin this day with you, continue it with you, and end it with you, so that this would be a day which has nothing to regret. Hear this morning prayer, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.”

 -Edward Markquart “Put on the Whole Armor of God” sermonsfromseattle.com

Pray in the Spirit.

Pray without ceasing.

Pray for one another.

And rejoice always.

We have much to be thankful for today, even amid our challenges. We have birthday celebrations and prayers for healing answered. We have the presence of God in times of joy and times of struggle. We have the gift of God’s word and the gift of a relationship with God through faith in Jesus that is grown through the gift of prayer.

As we armor up with prayer, may we not only pray without ceasing, but always give thanks.

God is with us. God is offering us the gift of his ways in order to stand firm in his power.

Like those who have gone before us, may we continue to follow Jesus as we armor up with God’s gifts of Truth- Justice- Peace- Faith- Salvation- the Word of God- Prayer.

And in doing so, may we live by the strength of God’s power and presence.

May it be so. Amen.