

It is good to be home. Home in Minnesota, home in Brainerd, home in this church with all of you. I just got back from being gone for two weeks on vacation. My mom and I drove to an old family cabin on a lake in Ontario Canada and spent some time soaking in the peace and quiet and the beauty of nature. I spent some time just being quiet on the dock, listening to the birds and the breeze, feeling the sun on my face, dipping my toes in the cool water of the lake. It is in moments like that when I well up with gratitude for the beautiful earth our God created and continues to renew.

Throughout our time there I was grateful that our cabin does not have electricity and that most of the time we were completely disconnected from the rest of the world. No radio, no television, we don't get the newspaper. It is a true respite from the constant stream of information that is possible elsewhere. One afternoon we got in the car to go into town for groceries and supplies and decided to turn on the radio and listen to the news. The pouring in of the "real world" to our peaceful time felt like a violent tsunami. It wasn't long before I turned it off and decided to allow the outside world to turn without me for a little while longer.

But vacations don't last forever, and the events of the world unfold whether we pay attention to them or not. I am so thankful that I have this place, this church, and you all to come home to. Not only because you all are wonderful human beings, but church has always given me a home base to hit the pause button of the craziness of the world. It is the place where God is front and center in our minds and we are reminded that God's love and grace can bring new life into our tired and weary souls. This is the joy the psalmist exclaims in Psalm 84 this morning. The joy of making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem or Zion and to enter into the dwelling place of God. While most modern people of faith don't believe that God physically dwells in a single physical space, for the ancient Hebrew people, the temple in Jerusalem was very much a tangible place where God took up residence. I imagine it felt both like a break and a respite from the pressures of life, as well as a type of homecoming – walking into the dwelling place of God and being welcomed into God's protective embrace. And while the pilgrimage to the temple was a time of renewal and joy, eventually the pilgrims would have to return to their daily lives.

2600 years ago, when Psalm 84 was likely written, daily life looked a lot different than it does now. Fast forward 700 years or so and we meet the early Christian followers in Ephesus whose context is completely different from the ancient Israelites and certainly different from our modern context. Ephesus was located in modern day

Turkey and when Paul is writing his letter to the Ephesians, they are living under the rule of the Roman Empire. These early Christians were harassed and persecuted sometimes to the point of execution. Christianity was a dangerous faith and the words of Paul in his letter were meant to provide encouragement and direction during a time when going to church could get you killed.

The end of his letter includes the verses Jan read for us about putting on the armor of God. If you read the weekly email, you know that I am not a huge fan of this imagery. Armor brings to mind images of war and violence, of human beings killing each other too often in the name of God. These images of shields and swords can shape our attitudes into thinking we need to be on the attack, seeking out those who disagree with our beliefs and cutting them down with the word of God. This scripture gets misinterpreted and misused to the point where many progressive preachers, including myself, are tempted to just skip it and preach on something else. But let's take a look at what the scripture actually says. One of the first things this text does is give us the purpose for this instruction. "Put on the whole armor of God so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers and the authorities...against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Now, there are entire seminary courses and volumes of books dedicated to the topic of why evil exists in the world. Whether or not there is an actual entity that can be called the devil whose temptations cause sin and evil to be prevalent in the world. Or whether the devil represents an internal struggle within each of us or is a metaphor for the systemic evils that take place when human beings are oppressed and not treated as God's beloved. And yet that really isn't the point of this text. Whether you believe that there is an actual devil or not, the point is to remember that we must focus on the big picture. Stand firm against evil forces. Individuals will come and go, but until systems of oppression are dismantled, the evil will continue. Racism, sexism, corruption, unfair labor practices, discrimination in all its forms, lack of healthcare, poverty, and the list goes on. These are systemic evils of the world that we must stand firm against.

Paul continues to tell the Ephesians that in order to withstand the evils of the day, one must put on the armor of God. Armor would have been a familiar metaphor for the hearers of these words. The Roman powers who persecuted the early Christians wore armor and carried swords. But the armor Paul describes turns the militaristic metaphor on its head. Instead of a belt used to hold weapons, wear the belt of truth. Instead of a breastplate that protects the heart from physical attack, wear a breastplate that

surrounds the heart with a desire for righteousness or justice. Instead of a shield that guards against weapons, hold the shield of faith to protect against fear or resignation. Instead of a helmet made for war, put on the helmet of salvation, a helmet that is designed to save us from a life that is aimless and self-focused and into a life that is focused on loving God, loving our neighbors, seeking justice, and loving kindness. Instead of a sword that is designed to take away life, instead carry a sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.

It is interesting that of all the metaphors Paul has listed up to this point, the sword is the only one for which he gives an explanation. It's almost as if Paul knew his words might be misunderstood and wanted to be very clear. The sword is not a weapon. It is a metaphor for the word of God, for God's truth. This sword can be used to cut down the lies that the evil of the world tries to sell us. Lies like, immigrants are animals, or we have the right to exploit the resources of our planet, or only certain people are worthy of respect and dignity, or people should just pick themselves up by their bootstraps. We can cut down these lies with God's truth that we must show love for the alien as one of us, that God entrusted us with care for GOD's creation, not the exploitation of its resources, that all humans are worthy of dignity and respect, and that we must love our neighbor and take care of them like the Good Samaritan.

Did you notice that I left out one of the pieces of armor? Which one? Shoes! I left it for last because it is the one piece of armor for which Paul doesn't specify a metaphor. Instead he leaves it up to the listener and gives this instruction – "As shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." I believe this is the key to this entire text. Proclaiming the gospel of peace is the way to fight the evil. Peace. Evil will not be defeated with violence, or attacks, but with peace. We might compare this idea to the words of Dr. King who said "darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."

This is a tall order. To stand firm against evil by proclaiming peace. My question to us all this morning, is what kind of shoes do we each need to add to our armor? What will equip you to be ready to proclaim peace? Do you need shoes of courage? Shoes of confidence? Shoes of empathy? Maybe you need shoes of awareness? For many of us, the shoes we wear are the shoes of encouragement by this church. They are designed in worship, crafted in our connections with one another, and laced up with the inspiration we get from each other and from the stories of God. Maybe the type of shoes we put on depends on the type of evil we are standing firm against and the situation we

find ourselves in. Maybe we need shoes of courage if our standing firm means non-violent direct action like a protest. Maybe we need shoes of awareness when those of us with white skin stand firm against the evils of racism and white supremacy. Maybe we need shoes of persistence when standing firm against abuse and sexual assault.

So, with all this talk of armor, let us remember that we are not being called to war. These metaphors of armor are to equip us to stand firm in the ways of peace. May we relish the times of renewal and rest and the times of close encounters with God in her many dwelling places so that when we are called to stand firm against systems of evil, we may be equipped with truth, justice, faith, and the boldness to respond with peace. Amen.