

Sermon on Ephesians 6:10-20
Pastor Douglas Larson

August 5 and 6, 2017
First Lutheran Church, Aitkin, Minnesota

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen

Are there boogeymen under your bed? There used to be a cartoon series called “Calvin and Hobbes”. Calvin was a little boy who had a stuffed toy tiger. Calvin was sure there was a boogeyman or monster under his bed. His father would come into his room, assure him there wasn’t and then leave. Then the monster would come out from under the bed!

In the early 1970’s, the movie “Exorcist” caused many people to think about demon possession and many came to believe or wonder whether they were possessed.

In light of that, here at the end of a wonderful, helpful letter to the Ephesians, Paul tells them—and us, that our fight is not with flesh and blood, but with the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic or world powers. Not with things we can see, but those unseen forces that are present and dangerous. Great! Just what we needed to hear: Yes there are monsters under your bed! There are evil forces out to get you!

We could listen to Paul and head home to do the same thing that my wife did one night when I woke up to hear a bat flying around in our bedroom. I turned on the light and took the only thing I could find, a pillow, and chased it to another room. It got out of there and headed back to the bedroom swooping down close to the bed. My wife gave a yell and pulled the covers tight over her head. What else can you do, really?

But Paul is telling us these things, not to scare us, not to have us pull the covers up over our heads. He tells us these things to remind us that we have protection from the forces of evil that are against us. He tells us these things so that we live in the strength and power of our Lord.

As Christians, we believe there is only one God, the Lord. We don’t believe that there is a good god and a bad god, the devil. Yet there is a power in the world that works against the Lord and against us. Where this power came from is unclear. The idea that angels in heaven rebelled against God and were kicked out comes more from John Milton, the English writer of “Paradise Lost” than from any Biblical source.

The serpent tempting Eve in the Garden of Eden does not represent the devil, but rather God giving humans the possibility of not obeying and trusting God totally—so that, because we have a choice of loving God or not, it will truly be out of love, not a robotic response. But we know how that turned out. Actually, that story in Genesis 3 is really our story. Will we fear, love and trust God above all else? It is a daily story.

And because we don’t trust God, is a power released into the world that lives upon our sin and comes to have a life of its own, like a parasite. Is the story of Pandora’s Box similar? Does this power exist but also live off our sin, rebellion and separation from

God? And does this power of evil then become what we call the devil, Satan, the evil one---or as Paul says in our scripture today: the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic or world powers that exist to work against God and us? The rulers, authorities, the cosmic powers are not flesh and blood, but still are present and operating in our world. They affect us and can be lived out in the lives of peoples, groups and even nations.

These powers can take over people and nations as in the case of Adolph Hitler and Nazism, or Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union and his secret service, or Pol Pat in Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge or other dictators, leaders or groups that run counter to the norms of society.

But these forces affect us in more personal ways. Jesus said that He was the good shepherd but the thief, who climbs in over the wall, comes to steal, to kill and destroy in John 10: 10. Jesus describes this power as that which comes to dry us up, to crumple us and take away what God wants for us.

So maybe these powers that Paul talks about today are the ones that come to us in the “shoulds, the have to’s, the must or else, the oughts” in our life. These words that weigh heavy upon us with guilt and shame. Or maybe these powers are the ones that come in beliefs like this, “I’m OK but you are not OK and never will be.” Or “You are not OK and don’t forget it!” Or maybe these powers come to us with a fear to try things, to risk something new, to take your hopes and dreams and try. They say: “Don’t even think about it!” Or maybe these powers are the ones that constantly rise up from traumatic events and paralyze us, refusing to let us move. These powers come to remind us of what we did wrong, the sins, the hurts that we have caused and say, “You will never live these down.” These are the powers that can send us to our beds wanting to pull up the covers over our heads.

In light of this reality, Paul ends his wonderful letter with great words of hope: be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. We do this by putting on the armor of God. Paul uses the image of a soldier to help us understand.

Put on the belt of truth. In 1 John 1:8-10 we hear, “if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins...” if we are truthful, we receive forgiveness. Be honest. Tell God our sins, our fears, our hopes. Be truthful and not hiding from God. The truth also means remembering that Jesus said he was the way the truth and the life. What does Jesus say to us? I have died for you, I love you!

Put on the breastplate of righteousness. Our police and military now wear vests of Kevlar. Righteousness is the result of the forgiveness of sins. It is a gift of Holy Baptism and reaffirmed in Holy Communion—“for you, the gracious forgiveness of sins.” Wear it proudly and confidently.

Put on shoes. And here I have to laugh and the men at Men’s Fellowship on Thursday did also. Any type of shoes will work. Just put something on so you can get out there with the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Pick up the shield of faith to quench the burning arrows of the evil one. Yes, I am a sinner and I have fallen short again and again. I know I haven't done enough and can never change some things. But Jesus has forgiven me and given me a place in His family. I am saved by the grace of God through faith, not by works, lest anyone should boast—or give up in despair, Ephesians 2:8. I am a forgiven sinner, a saint.

Put on the helmet of salvation. Put on the knowledge that Jesus, the chosen one of God has claimed me and will never let me go. Like the prodigal son, I can come home and know that the strong arms and hands of Jesus, skilled at the plane and the lathe will one day hold me as I leave this world and am carried into the fullness of God's Kingdom.

Then take the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. A power to cut both ways, to kill the sinful self day after day and to make for healing. A word that acknowledges that I have questions, doubts, failures but a word that also says God is with me. Immanuel, the beauty of the Christmas story and the poem "Footprints" and the 23rd Psalm. A word that Jesus began His ministry with, "Behold, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the Good News."

Paul ends this section by telling us to pray in the Spirit. That means pray in the relationship that Jesus gave to us with the gift of the Holy Spirit at our Baptism—a gift to help us believe; to be comforted by its Presence; to be led into knowledge; to pray for us when we don't know how or what to pray for. We are in good hands because of Jesus and His gifts to us.

Yes, there are forces in our world that are against us. This isn't new. But not a cause for alarm. God won at the Resurrection of Jesus from sin, death and the grave. God protects us as we live. Put on the armor of God—we will be OK!