

Sermon 9-06-09<sup>1</sup>  
Isaiah 59:16-21  
Ephesians 6:10-24  
*The Armor of God*

For the last two months we've been making our way through Paul's letter to the Ephesians and most recently, we've been focusing on the power and presence of Jesus dwelling within us and how that affects our day-to-day, ordinary lives. Some of you might be getting tired of hearing this, assuming that I'm a broken record who can't move on to a different tune, and yet we have been focusing in on this reality, on the presence of Jesus in our lives week after week because it is so integrally important for understanding what Paul is saying and for understanding the Christian life.

From the very beginning of Ephesians, Paul emphasizes the work of God in the world; not only what God has done in the past, but also focusing on the current mission and ministry of God. Before he ever focused on his advice for how Christians should live in the world, Paul began his letter by reminding his readers of the great and glorious blessings God has showered us with in Jesus Christ his Son. Paul emphasizes the ministry of God, who blesses us with every spiritual blessing, choosing us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless; blessing us in Christ, the one through whom we know redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins, and the riches of his grace. Paul emphasizes the ministry of God honing in on the reality that "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our sins, made us alive together with Christ (2:4-5)." And being alive together with Christ is not something that merely happens to us from the outside, as if God twiddles his thumbs and makes it so,

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon preached by the Rev. Thomas Moore on Sunday, September 6, 2009 at Emsworth UP Church

rather God in, through, and as Jesus Christ penetrates to the depths of our lives; joining us to his life that he might dwell in us through the power of his Holy Spirit. This is 100% God's work rather than our own. It's only after he outlines the mission and ministry of God for the redemption and reconciliation of the world that Paul looks at the flip side of how the people of God are called to live in the world in response to God's work.

This is no small thing either. Because of all God has done for us in and through Christ out of the freedom of his love and power, as Christians we have a very specific vocation within the life of the world. We're called to put away the old life and know that we are clothed with new life; clothed with Christ Jesus himself through the Holy Spirit. Living into our union with Christ, we're called to put away falsehood and remember the calling to which we've been called. In the final chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul continues outlining what the life of the Christian and the life of the Church is to look like in the midst of the world. He isn't detailing burdensome responsibilities that we are called to bear upon our shoulders to somehow earn salvation or gain God's redemption; rather he is calling the church to be attentive to her holy vocation in the midst of a hostile and selfish world by recognizing and living into our union with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a call for the church to be strong in the Lord, standing firm and resting in the strength of God's power as opposed to our own.

Paul calls attention to our holy vocation by referring to all that assails us; focusing not on those bodily aggressors but upon the spiritual assaults that the church most assuredly faces day in and day out. He doesn't want us to be babes lost in the wilderness; rather as those who are clothed in Christ Jesus, joined to his life, we are to put on the whole armor of God to defend ourselves against the principalities and powers. Now, to

understand what these principalities and powers are, what they look like, we have to name them, and call them out for what they are.

Living in the midst of our culture, it's easy to get caught up in the flow of things; caught up in the flow and systems of greed, money, misleading or false information, outward appearances, innocuous distractions that get in the way of our discipleship, the blatant false idols we set up around us, diversity sensitivity (which in itself is not that harmful but is easily abused by those who refuse to recognize a Christian witness in the midst of things) and finally a sense of flexibility or willingness to "go with the flow." These are the principalities and powers; they are those things that get in the way of our discipleship. They are the roadblocks and humps in the road that can make the Way of faith difficult to travel. The principalities and powers are the sin-structures of the world that entice folks to get in on what they are doing. Serving sin, death, and evil, the principalities and powers are opposed to the will of God. In response to them, Paul calls us to our holy vocation, to put on the whole armor of God and stand firm in the midst of the daily assault that will inevitably occur.

That's when we get to a particularly difficult point in the life of faith. It's quite easy to remember all that God has done for us out of the freedom of his love made known to us in, through, and as Jesus Christ; it's easy to affirm that Jesus dwells within us by the power of the Holy Spirit, but when it comes to standing firm against the powers of greed, distraction, and the false idols around us – from where does our strength come? By whose power are we able to summon up the courage to resist, to stand firm in the face of those principalities and powers that oppose the mission and ministry of God to the world?

This might come across as a little odd, but I have a favorite Christian martyr. In the list of all those who have lost their lives for the sake of Jesus Christ, one person in particular has been a model and an inspiration for my life and ministry. How many of you are familiar with Dietrich Bonhoeffer? To give you the short of it, Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian active in the 1920's and 30's. As Germany moved towards the Nazi party and Hitler rose to power, many German Christians saw this as God's blessing upon their nation. But Bonhoeffer saw things differently. He viewed the Nazi party as an entity, as a principality and power that was against the mission and ministry of God. He stood against the Nazi regime and those Christians who went along with it. He stood firm and was persecuted for it; forced to live in hiding yet finding an invaluable opportunity to lead an underground seminary that trained pastors within the classical confessions of faith. This went on for a number of years until the plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler.

Bonhoeffer played a role in this great plot, and when it failed, his role was discovered. He was arrested in April of 1943 and incarcerated in Tegel until 1944. From there he bounced around until he ended up at Flossenburg. On April 9, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged by the Gestapo. Through the witness of his life we catch a glimpse of a man who wore the armor of God; not through the weapons of war or the tactics of the principalities and powers represented in the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer stood firm in life and in death not because he was able to summon up the courage and the steam to do it on his own. Rather, he knew and trusted that Jesus is risen; that he's alive and present to us even now through the power of the Holy Spirit, binding us in union with himself that he might dwell within us and empower us to get in on his mission and ministry to the world, empowering us to put on the whole armor of God.

I don't want this to come across as sounding deranged or fatalistic, but, as I'm sure many of you are aware, in our pilgrimage with our Lord and Savior there are many ups and downs, bumps and bruises, and challenges to our discipleship. Most of us won't encounter a regime like the Nazi's that we might have to stand up against. Most of us won't encounter a situation where confessing the Lordship of Jesus Christ means immediate death. Yet in some ways, the challenges facing us as disciples are harder because they're not as apparent. The internet, television, a computer, cell phone, ipod, turbo charged engine, fictional book, our jobs, places where we shop, or many other items that we're familiar with aren't necessarily evil within themselves. But sin is adventitious and once they're in the hands of those who would twist and pervert their purpose, they can become a roadblock to our discipleship that entice us and lulls us away from our Lord and Savior. That's why Paul calls us to stand firm, to not only be aware of the mission and ministry of God but to live into our union with Jesus Christ; participating in his mission and ministry to the world, being clothed with the whole armor of God and submerging our lives in prayer.

For most of you, you probably don't get up in the morning, make some coffee, take a shower, and then tighten the belt of truth around your waist, or put on the breastplate of righteousness, or place the shoes of the gospel upon your feet. I'm willing to bet you don't walk out of the house carry a literal shield of faith before you or put on a helmet of salvation. Paul isn't talking about literally getting dressed. All the various elements Paul describes are the God-given blessing we receive through the waters of baptism; the spiritual blessings that come from God as he dwells within us in, through, and as Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. They are the spiritual blessings that assist us in our pilgrimage with God; they are the Christ-breathed blessings through which we are laid hold

of by his mighty hand, empowered to stand firm against the principalities and powers, filling our breath with the prayers of supplication, and guide us in our Lord's very footsteps to live into the holy vocation to which we are called each and every day of our lives. The armor of God isn't about blood letting and physical battle; it's about our holy vocation that we share as those joined to the living, reigning, active, and present life of Jesus Christ to be the people of God Almighty both in the world and in every thing we do – for Jesus' isn't merely Lord of part of our lives, he claims our whole life for redemption and the glory of his kingdom. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.