

Are You Strong Enough?

Psalm 84:1-12; Ephesians 6:10-20

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
14th Sunday after Pentecost, August 26, 2018
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Our culture says, “Be strong.” And in some ways, our culture often asks us, “Are you strong enough?”

Be strong. Identify with the strong. “Might makes right” is a popular slogan. “Patience, kindness, and generosity” are among the fruits of the Spirit that we read about in church circles (Galatians 5), but those attributes don’t fly very well in a word that talks trash, and likes to flex its muscle. And Jesus might bless the meek and the merciful (Matthew 5), but the world misconstrues those attributes as signs of weakness, and if you watch the news, the meek and merciful often get thrown under the bus.

Be strong.

I took a Boy Scout troop to NYC once. At the “Arms and Armor Court” in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the boys were wildly enthused. That gallery is filled with suits of armor, life-sized shining knights riding on bronze-sculpture horses, battle axes in hand, spiked balls, daggers, lances. It is quite a scene.

The boys walked pretty quickly through all the other galleries: they didn’t like the impressionists, the Hudson River Valley School, or even the nudes. But when they got to the Arms and Armor Court, they slowed way down and took serious notice. Helmets, flintlock rifles, long swords, a Dragoon Percussion Revolver made by Samuel Colt, 14th century sabers, and crossbows. The boys slowed way down and smiled, and pointed, and whispered.

Be strong.

At the museum, we learned by reading the plaques in that gallery that for every type of armor there was a weapon designed to overpower it. No matter how strong we think we are, our defenses ultimately are weak. Every defense can be overcome. No defense is full-proof.

The writer of Ephesians began his conclusion of his letter to the church in Ephesus with these words: BE STRONG. But he wasn’t talking about packing heat, or having lots of muscles, or even about having the newest chainmail and armor. “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of *his power*.”

Paul is saying, don’t rely on metal or stone, arsenic or napalm, drawbridge or moat. Rely on God for defense. “Put on the whole armor of God.”

Why? *Because you’re going to need it.* And God’s armor is the only thing for the church that will afford any *real* protection against all sorts of struggles the church would face, and not only from enemies of flesh and blood, but also “spiritual forces” and “cosmic powers.” *You’re going to need God’s armor.* Iron-age spears, battle axes, and red nuclear buttons won’t help.

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Do you remember the picture of a downtown lunch counter at Woolworth’s in Greensboro? Four black students at the local university are trying to order cups of coffee. African Americans weren’t allowed to sit in those chairs, of course, and they weren’t allowed to eat lunch there—or breakfast, or dinner. No coke. No coffee. No pie.

The waitress told them to leave. They stayed until closing. And they were never served a cup of coffee.

At the Woolworths to the north of town, the lunch counter was integrated. At the one near campus, it wasn't. Those brave (naïve?) men thought that was wrong. Against their parents' wishes to "be nice" and "not make waves," these men did something about it.

Those men sitting at that counter needed a strong defense—like truth, righteousness, and faith. They needed a strong defense, because a bronze helmet and brass knuckles just wouldn't do much good. A mob could gather. A mob could crush them in a minute no matter how they were armed. The only way to change those ignorant laws and beat that kind of steely-eyed hatred is with a vision of God's justice borne on the wings of love.

The Greensboro Four—David Richmond, Franklin McCain¹, Ezell Blair, Jr, and Joseph McNeil—didn't need guns or grenades. They needed courage. They needed to be armored with the stuff of God. They didn't need the rage they felt to spill over into fist fights; they needed to control their rage with patience. (How they did this, I do not know.) They didn't need to meet rudeness with rudeness; they needed kindness. They didn't need the greed that says "this counter is mine and you can't have it;" they needed generosity of Spirit. They didn't need the arrogance that sometimes comes from knowing that you are right; they needed humility and meekness, knowing they were right but not flaunting it. They needed the gospel truth running through their veins and the shield provided only by faith.

This was the only strength that David, Franklin, Ezell, and Joseph needed. And, indeed, it's all they had. So, on the afternoon of February 1st, 1960, following in the footsteps of a Palestinian agitator named Jesus, McCain threw a coat over his ROTC uniform (he retired as an Air Force Brigadier General) and joined Blair, McNeil and Richmond for the one-mile walk from the library at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University to the Woolworths in downtown Greensboro. McNeil was later to say, "I knew I was going to jail for a long, long time, or I was going back to campus in a pine box."² Those brave men knew it might be the last cup of coffee they might ever order in this life.

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Are you strong enough?

The answer, Paul says, is, "No." He urges us: don't rely on your own strength. Instead, "Be strong in the Lord."

By myself, no, I'm not strong enough. But we are as strong as we need to be with God, imitating God, trusting God. The more I trust God, the stronger I get. The more I lean on God, the more secure I am. The closer I walk with God, the less this world's slung insults and arrows matter, and the more bravely I can walk in the faith, even into the valley of the shadow of death.

Jesus wore the armor that Paul talks about. At the end of his physical ministry on earth, Jesus also wore something else; he wore a crown of thorns. He did this as a means of showing the world what perfect love looks like. And he trusted that his father's power was greater than that of the Roman government.

It was. It is.

Alleluia.

¹ See McCain's obit in the LA Times: <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/jan/10/local/la-me-franklin-mccain-20140111>

² *ibid.*

Psalm 84:1-12

**How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!**

my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

**O LORD of hosts,
my King**

Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.

As they go through the valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.

**O LORD God of hosts,
hear my prayer**

give ear, O God of Jacob!

**Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.**

I would rather be a doorkeeper
in the house of my God than live
in the tents of wickedness.

No good thing does the LORD withhold
from those who walk uprightly.

**O LORD of hosts,
happy is everyone**

**happy is everyone
who trusts in you.**

**How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!**

My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;

Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars . . .

**O LORD of hosts,
and my God.**

Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

**O LORD God of hosts,
hear my prayer**

Behold our shield, O God;

For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.

For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favor and honor.

**O LORD of hosts,
happy is everyone
happy is everyone
who trusts in you.**

Ephesians 6:10-20 10Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. 11Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. 19Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, 20for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Éphésiens 6:10-20 La Bible du Semeur (BDS)

10 Pour conclure: puisez votre force dans le

Seigneur et dans sa grande puissance.

11 Revêtez-vous de l'armure de Dieu afin de pouvoir tenir ferme contre toutes les ruses du diable. 12 Car nous n'avons pas à lutter contre des êtres de chair et de sang, mais contre les Puissances, contre les Autorités, contre les Pouvoirs de ce monde des ténèbres, et contre les esprits du mal dans le monde céleste. 13 C'est pourquoi, endossez l'armure que Dieu donne afin de pouvoir résister au mauvais jour et tenir jusqu'au bout après avoir fait tout ce qui était possible[a]. 14 Tenez donc ferme: ayez autour de la taille la vérité pour ceinture, et revêtez-vous de la droiture en guise de cuirasse. 15 Ayez pour chaussures à vos pieds la disponibilité à servir l'Évangile de la paix. 16 En toute circonstance, saisissez-vous de la foi comme d'un bouclier avec lequel vous pourrez éteindre toutes les flèches enflammées du diable[b]. 17 Prenez le salut pour casque et l'épée de l'Esprit, c'est-à-dire la Parole de Dieu. 18 En toutes circonstances, faites toutes sortes de prières et de requêtes sous la conduite de l'Esprit. Faites-le avec vigilance et constance, et intercédez pour tous les membres du peuple saint, 19 en particulier pour moi. Demandez à Dieu de me donner, quand je parle, les mots que je dois dire pour annoncer avec assurance le secret que révèle l'Évangile. 20 C'est de cet Évangile que je suis l'ambassadeur, un ambassadeur enchaîné. Priez donc pour que je l'annonce avec assurance comme je dois en parler.