

The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity
16 October, Anno Domini 2022
Ephesians 6:10-17

Battle-wearied saints of God,

War is awful. We've all seen the terrible images of what war does. Most of us know someone who has lived through the evil of war and either have horrifying stories to tell or are too horrified by what they have seen to talk. Some of you have lived through the devastation of war. War can break even the strongest men, turning some into animals and others into shattered shells of what they once were. War is always ugly, the ultimate outpouring of hatred between men whom God created to live in unity with Him and with one another. War is demonic.

And there is no greater war, none so ugly, none so devastating as the one which is waged, not on land, sea, or air, but every single day in the hearts of mankind - in your own heart and conscience. This is not a war over political ideologies or national boundaries. Those are, at worst, fronts of the main war; at best, completely irrelevant distractions from the main war, the impotent strivings of men chasing after idols. As we just heard from St. Paul "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." That is the battle you are right smack dab in the middle of even this very hour, whether you want to be or not, whether you believe it or not. This is the battle that is depicted time and again in the revelation to St. John. You are at war against the devil who has been waging war against God since the beginning. It doesn't matter how old or young you are, your ethnic background, or your tax bracket. This is a war that you were drafted into the moment you were conceived and that will not end for you until you close your eyes for the last time in this wretched world.

To be sure, the machinations and wars between men can be manifestations of this greater battle. As one nation seeks to exert its will over others, as some seek to use their wealth to amass power and exert God-like control, as those who hate the Word of God use intimidation and threats of legal and social and financial destruction to silence any who believe the Word of God - they operate as the devil's soldiers to drive Christians into despair and finally abandon the faith. Governments, bureaucracies, and judges try to worm their way into the temple of God and into your consciences where they ought not be. They seek to be your god and father from whom you expect to receive all good, in whom you trust to help and save you. And how sad that we let them. We rest easy when "our people" are in power and break the Fourth Commandment and imagine revolt when they aren't. That is idolatry. Repent. We need to be constantly ready to recognize and resist their encroachment, denying to Caesar what belongs to God alone.

Divisions among Christians and spouses and families even exist because the devil is constantly engaged in his warfare, sending in spies, sowing seeds of division about what God has spoken. He invites man to sit in judgment of what God has spoken. Even pious and well-meaning people in varying degrees seek to make God make sense and to operate within the limitations of their own understanding. Doubt is cast on the clear light of Holy Scripture. The ancient evil question continues to echo “Did God really say?” We often respond to our suffering by questioning and rebelling against the good God who created us rather than crying out in lament with the psalmist and remembering God’s faithfulness of old. We feel the world and our neighbors push back against what God has spoken and we are tempted with the thought that maybe unbelief has it right and God’s Word is wrong. But the Word of the Lord endures forever. The Church Militant’s constant prayer is that of the Lord Jesus Christ “Holy Father, keep them in Your Name, which You have given Me, that they may be one, even as we are one. Sanctify them in Your truth. Your Word is truth. I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me.”

And what is so horrifically sad about this war are the casualties. Those who die in the midst of man’s wars only lose their bodies. In the war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, those who fall in battle, who succumb to temptation and depart from the faith, separate themselves from God’s mercy forever. They reject the true and the good for lies and death that falsely promise ease and pleasure now. And God’s children know that, which is why it is so gut-wrenching when we see anyone either never believe, or worse, confess Christ and then deny Him in word and deed. Family, friend, or foe - it doesn’t matter. These are the most bitter tears that can be shed. They are the tears of Christ weeping over Jerusalem. We know that those who die confessing Christ live with Christ and enjoy the full glory of His presence. But no such joy awaits those who despise Christ and who trust in anything but Him. It doesn’t matter how evil or cruel they are to us. Like our heavenly Father, we take no pleasure in anyone’s eternal destruction. We pray that God would turn their hearts before it is too late.

And knowing the weakness of all flesh, it is absolutely vital that we never imagine that we are safe in this war or that we are never in danger of falling like others. It is not that they were never actually Christians. They had been washed in Baptism and received the promises of God. God had made them His children. But some set aside the Word. Some were never instructed in it. Some believed that because they had read it once they were now experts and no longer needed it. Others became convinced that the faith wasn’t serious because the lives of their families were not built around and shaped by the Word. Where the Word is set aside or given only lip service, the devil finds a home and slowly replaces faith with unbelief. He inflicts mortal wounds that snuff out faith. We heard again St. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, describe the **WHOLE** armor of God which every Christian **NEEDS** to wear day and night. Not one piece of armor can be set aside without exposing yourself and your children to the gravest of dangers.

First we are directed to the belt of truth. God has spoken His Word through the prophets, apostles, and evangelists. He has caused His Word to be written down so that you can judge anything and everything you hear, against what God has spoken. We saw this in the revelation to St. John as the apostle was commanded to write what he heard and saw. And the apostle warns “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.” God’s Word is to be received as it is in all its fullness. Anyone who presumes to sit in judgment of the divine Word, invites divine judgment upon himself. Nothing necessary for salvation has been withheld from us. Scripture is clear and it is sufficient. Know the Scriptures. Study them morning, noon, and night. Come to Bible Class. Let the Scriptures be to you more precious than all the riches and pleasures of this world for they alone are true. They alone are life. Let them be the conversation around the dinner table and as you drive down the road. Daily arm your children with the truth. It is the most loving thing you can do for them. Give them Jesus day in and day out that they may be able to smell the devil’s lies a mile away and flee from them.

Put on the breastplate of Christ’s righteousness. You are not righteous. You have disobeyed the Ten Commandments of God and deserve His wrath. But, in His great mercy, Christ has given you His own righteousness. In Holy Baptism, the filthy rags of your unbelief and disobedience were taken away from you and you were given the wedding garment of Christ’s own perfect righteousness. In Him, and only Him, are you righteous. And when the devil seeks to attack you on account of your sin, the righteousness of Christ is an impenetrable breastplate.

Having placed on your feet the gospel of peace you are prepared to move in this world of sin and death toward the heavenly Jerusalem. The cross of Christ has reconciled you to the Father. There is peace between you and God. You need not fear persecution or affliction, the devil’s accusations, war, famine, inflation, or corrupt government. Your peace is a peace that passes all human understanding because it is rooted not in what you have done but in the unchangeable promises of Christ. This gospel of peace prepares you to walk away from the pleasures of this world which would draw you away from Christ. You are but sojourners in this world. You await something far better, the kingdom of God which is yours now by faith and which one day will be revealed when Christ returns in glory. Your feet are swiftly making their way to heaven.

Faith is the great broad shield that extinguishes the devil’s arrows. Clinging firmly to Christ, taking refuge in His righteousness, no lie can rob you of salvation. Faith trusts in nothing except Jesus’ Blood and righteousness. It doesn’t trust in your works. Faith doesn’t even trust in itself because even it is unable to be pure and perfect. Nothing is sure except what Christ has done for you and promised to you. Nothing more is needed. Every attack of Satan must fall as it comes crashing against faith in Christ Jesus.

Place on your head the helmet of salvation - the promise of redemption by the Blood of Jesus. Satan will seek to use both reason and your desires to twist and pervert the clear Word of God. He will confuse those two essential words of God - His holy Law and His forgiving Gospel - so that you are led away into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. But when your thoughts are taken captive to Christ and all things are measured by the Holy Scriptures, then you will have right judgment in all things and you will not be deceived. When your salvation is not firmly and only in Christ, when Holy Baptism is no longer a regenerative work of God and the Holy Supper is no longer the very Body and Blood of your Savior bestowing upon you the fullness of His sacrifice, then you will be left to search for another salvation, others sources of surety and comfort. But they don't exist. God wants you to be certain that His has covered you in His forgiveness. Thus He has given you His Word and the precious Sacraments that you may say with all boldness and confidence "I am forgiven. I am going to heaven. God has said so."

And what is a soldier without his weapon? But you do not fight with guns and bombs. You fight with the sword that cuts to the division of soul and spirit - the Word of God. It cuts through the lies. It exposes the evil intentions of the heart. It scatters all the legions of hell. But it also binds up the broken-hearted and sets free the prisoner. It opens the eyes of the blind. It gives life to those dead in the dark guilt of their sin. It gives hope to those dismayed by the darkness that surrounds them. It absolves the repentant. It gives peace to the anxious. It is the bright light of truth that keeps us on the narrow path that leads to eternal life.

It goes without saying that we live in evil days and that they are growing more evil. Children are told to question what God has made them, false teachers set up shop on every corner claiming to be able to do Christianity better than everyone else, wars and rumors of wars are a daily drumbeat, predators slink around in video games and social media. The return of Christ is nearer to us now than ever before and we pray that He would indeed come quickly and save us. And we pray that until that day He would bind up the wounds we have suffered in battle, forgive our sins, and comfort our consciences. We pray that He would dry the tears that we have shed over dear brothers and sisters in the faith who have separated themselves from us, a sorrow our Savior knows quite well. We pray that He would strengthen us to stand against the lies and attacks that would cause us to lay down our arms and abandon the faith. We pray that He would give us joy and peace in perseverance, knowing that our faith is not in vain and that the victory is assured to God's children and that one glorious day we will be granted the eternal rest where sin and sorrow and pain will never touch us again.

Dear saints of God. Your Lord knows how bitter and long this war is. He, your captain, has gone before you and crushed the ancient serpent's head once and for all. He has laid down His life to conquer sin, death, and the devil for you. The devil has already lost.

There is no other outcome possible. At times it feels hopeless. It feels like hell is closing in and the Church of God will be swept away. And if not the whole church, then most certainly it has felt as though you yourself were about to succumb to the battle strain. You have suffered terrible loss and persecution. At times your weak flesh has betrayed you and allowed one of Satan's temptations to drag you to the ground. But you are Baptized. You are the redeemed of the Lord. Lift up your eyes to the everlasting sign of victory - the crucified Jesus who now lives triumphant in the heavenly places, ruling over heaven and earth, preserving you, His precious saints, until that day when your swords will be turned into plowshares, when divisions will cease, when the enemy will be cast into that great lake of fire for eternity and you will be crowned with everlasting life and peace. That day awaits you as surely as Christ has died and risen from the dead. You are Baptized. You bear on your own body the sign of the holy cross which marks you a member of He who is the victor. You will follow your Lord through the valley of the shadow of death to eternal victory. Do not be afraid of the trouble you see and hear around you. Put on the WHOLE armor of God and you will prevail.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly and save us.

In the Name of +Jesus.

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.