

## **“Holy Armor”**

**Sermon on Sunday, August 22, 2021**

**Dear church,**

We know a thing or two about protection and armor these days. In some aspects we know more than we care to know. Masks have become a fact of life, and while we hope that we can move past mouth guards sometime in the near future, (the sooner the better!), we have learned to protect ourselves. Back in July I walked into a store in Oberammerau, Bavaria, to purchase a rain cover for my backpack ahead of a hike in the mountains. I had one of those blue surgical masks on when I entered the store. The lady at the counter got all nervous. She said, “No, you need a different mask: N95.” “If I get caught serving you, you will have to pay a fine and I will have to pay several thousand Euros in penalties.” I felt bad. I had not known about that particular law in the state of Bavaria. She did sell the small item to me and I was out of her hair in less than a minute, still with the wrong kind of mask on, but the truth is, I felt like a trespasser.

It’s still amazing to me how our world and the feeling of life have changed since March of 2020. Up until that point, we couldn’t picture ourselves or others running around with masks. In hospitals maybe, for a patient who was severely immune compromised maybe, but not in church, right? We may have seen people with masks in smog-filled cities in China. But here in North Wales? No way!

When Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, he used the image of a spiritual armor. The sixth chapter of that letter talks about protection, a spiritual armor. And you might ask, “What do we need a spiritual armor for?” “What is that about?” Let me attempt to explain how Paul saw it. He believed that the world was filled with powerful influencers. He certainly wasn’t talking about You Tube influencers. As he saw it some 2,000 years ago, the universe was influenced by invisible powers and spiritual forces that had an impact on the way people thought, felt and lived. He called them powers or principalities. He may have had angels and demons in mind, I don’t know for sure. I do know that Paul’s worldview feels exotic to most of us today. Haven’t we adopted a scientific mindset? And haven’t we made lots of progress based on our increasing knowledge of science? We know better, right? But do we???

We will all have to admit that there are powerful influences and influencers out there in our world, often invisible ones. Some of them come via airwaves, some on the world-wide Internet, some on radio stations, some via hackers, influencing people with the sweetest of poisons: affirming what they already believe, creating anger.

Both good and bad, fake and real, legitimate and illegitimate information reaches people's minds and souls on any given day. Was Paul so wrong to say that we are in a spiritual war? I think what we experience on top of the visible, identifiable problems of this world (as if they were not enough!) are battles which are fought through ideas and ideologies, information and misinformation; they are invisible and can't be traced easily, which makes them all the more dangerous.

And so, this passage about the spiritual armor, as much as it was inspired by the battle tools of a Roman soldier, has a certain relevance for the age of the worldwide Internet, the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Allow me to cherry-pick a little bit and start with the protection that may be the most important. "Stand firm then," Paul says, "with the belt of truth buckled around your waist." What he mentions here is the battle of our time: the battle for truth. People want to know the truth in any given discussion. But the truth is not just an abstract thing. Truth begins with me and you and our sincerest desire to know what is right and what is wrong, even if it goes against our adopted belief system, our favorite party or against family tradition. It starts with you and me sincerely wanting to know truth, including truth about ourselves. Do we want to buckle up and be those types of people? People who seek truth? It will go a long way toward defeating the powers and principalities that attempt to rule our world!

Let me cherry-pick another part of the armor Paul mentions. He says, "Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one." Faith also goes a long way in this battle, because I have the strong feeling that certain powers and influencers are out there to undermine our faith in things we have held sacred for a long time: not only faith in God, which has been under attack for some time; but also faith in human decency; faith in democracy; faith in our neighbors, no matter what race they belong to; faith in our country. The deterioration of faith and trust will make us more vulnerable to bad influences and bad influencers. Take up the shield of faith!

I don't have time this morning to contemplate all the parts of the armor Paul brings to our attention. But I'd like to say this: the spiritual aspect in the battles of our time is much more relevant than we may think. I hope and pray that we pay as much attention to the invisible forces that try to rule this world as we are to those that are visible. I pray that the God that Paul so fervently sought, the God that he prayed to, may give us a desire to face the challenges of our time clear-eyed and with spiritual courage. We must be awake. Especially in this Internet world that has opened up all kinds of channels, including evil channels. Be alert! And have your armor ready!

**Amen.**