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*Suit Up: The Sword of the Spirit*

Ephesians 6:10-18; Hebrews 4:12; Matthew 4:1-11

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I love the Bible. I love all the great stories of the Old Testament. I love reading about all the things Jesus said and did. [If I had unlimited time and money, I would joyfully go back to seminary and take more Bible classes.]

I've shared before how I came to this love of the Bible. It started when I was a kid and my dad would just tell stories at the table when the family was gathered for meals, and sometimes he'd just re-tell a Bible story that he thought we might find interesting, especially the weirdly bizarre ones like the story of the time when a bunch of little boys mocked the prophet Elisha and said, "Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!" and Elisha cursed them, and then two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled 42 of the boys (2 Kings 2:23-25). So then I would want to read the Bible for myself to see what else was in there—I mean, wouldn't you?

I didn't read the Bible as much as I wish I had, but I must have read it some, because when I was an older teenager, old enough to really get on my parents' nerves and make them count the days until I left for college, my father needed to rein me in a little bit one day, and said to me, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord," which by the way, is Ephesians 6:1 And, much to the surprise of both my parents and myself, I promptly fired back, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children," which happens to be Ephesians 6:4. I think Dad wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or proud.

Now that wasn't exactly a duel, but I do remember feeling very pleased with myself for holding my own in that particular exchange.

Today is our last sermon in our series about putting on the whole armor of God. We are down to the very last part of our armor, the sword of the Spirit. Unlike all the other pieces that we've looked at in previous weeks, this one is an actual weapon. Now, just as every single piece of armor and equipment a police officer carries is for defense, even the gun, it's the same thing with the armor of God. Even the sword is meant for defense, not offense.

This is an important reminder because sometimes Christians can be pretty offensive in our use of scripture. It's one thing to post a verse of the day or a verse of the week, as our church often does. We do that for educational and inspirational purposes. It's quite another thing to use scripture as a weapon to shame someone or advance a political agenda. We sometimes lob these little scripture grenades at each other, and then wonder why there's so much division. [For example, many Christians have tried to justify discrimination against people who identify as LGBTQ by quoting an extremely tiny handful of verses from the Bible like, "A man shall not lie with another man," without providing any other context or historical background when they quote these verses. Other Christians can sound self-righteous if they only quote verses about social justice and never acknowledge the need for individual responsibility.] The image of the word of God as a sword reminds us to be careful when using scripture as a weapon, because if we're not careful, we can cut people, including ourselves.

Now, cutting isn't always bad. A surgeon uses a scalpel to cut, so that he or she can get in there and clean out infection, or remove a tumor, or whatever healing action needs to be taken. That's the kind of cutting implied in Hebrews 4:12, our second scripture reading today. For me it brought to mind the story of Pentecost. After Peter told the story of Jesus, and explained to the crowds that the Jesus who had been crucified was risen, and was Lord and Messiah, the book of Acts says the people were "cut to the heart," and asked Peter, "What should we do?" And 3,000

of them, the story says, repented and were baptized. So, the word proclaimed faithfully can cut in a good way.

But the sword of the Spirit also helps us stand firm, as the writer of Ephesians urges his readers to do. Watch how Jesus uses it in hand to hand combat in our third scripture reading this morning . . . (we usually hear this story on the first Sunday of Lent).

Did you notice how Jesus uses scripture in this story? Every time he hears that devilish voice, he is READY. And we learn several things from this.

First, Jesus didn't magically acquire his knowledge of scripture overnight. He was human, and he had to learn just like everybody else. But he clearly did, and from the way he uses scripture in all of the Gospels, he sounds like someone who made scripture part of his daily life. After an extended period of time without food, humans don't react as quickly and sharply as they do when they are well fed. [ Personally, I don't do well after just skipping lunch. ] Yet in his weakened state, Jesus' working knowledge of scripture was enough that he could easily call forth appropriate replies from the book of Deuteronomy.

We all have things we know by heart. Pledge of allegiance. Lord's Prayer. Hopefully most of us still remember the Fruit of the Spirit, which we learned over the summer? My daughter Madeleine challenged herself to memorize all the different types of penguins when she was in sixth grade, and can still name them for you if you ask, while my mother can still remember the jingle for Squirrel Peanut Butter, which I guess was a thing in Canada way back when. When you know something by heart, you don't need to be at the top of your game to remember it—it's there, you can call it up in an instant—and that's how scripture was for Jesus, and for others throughout history.

Now let's look at HOW Jesus uses this scripture that is so much a part of him. Again, he doesn't go on the offensive. He uses it to stand firm. As the voices in his head persuade him to consider some very real possibilities to lead a different kind of life, Jesus wields the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, to fend them off. He will not veer off the path that is set before him. And in the end, Jesus doesn't destroy the devil, which is not his to do, but he disarms him, which is much more effective.

So what does all this mean for us today?

I like what Biblical scholar N.T. Wright says about this passage:

The temptations we all face, day by day and at critical moments of decision and vocation in our lives, may be very different from those of Jesus, but they have exactly the same point. They are not simply trying to entice us into committing this or that sin. They are trying to distract us, to turn us aside from the path of servanthood to which our baptism has commissioned us.<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever gotten distracted from the leading the life God gives you? Has scripture ever been helpful to you in revealing this? For example, have you ever felt like you just don't have time to take a whole Sabbath Day? I mean, how can we? Look at everything we have to do and everybody who's depending on us and all the calls, and errands, and deadlines breathing down our back. But then we remember, "Honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work." And we know that this commandment is timeless, with no expiration date, that if even God rested, who are we that we think this does not apply to us? And it cuts us to the heart to realize we are not resting and being refreshed as God intended, and it hurts not only us but our families and our colleagues and even our pets. . .

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004.

Or maybe we're worried about money. Some of us in this congregation have abundant resources, but others in our midst do not. We wonder if we'll be able to retire someday, we wonder if we will outlive our savings if we're fortunate enough to have that. We wonder if we will be able to afford good care for ourselves when the time comes. The voices in our head say, "There's not enough, there's not enough, there's not enough," but Jesus said, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. God feeds the birds, how much more will God feed you? Can you add anything to your life by worrying?" And maybe the grace in this word of God pierces our hearts in unexpected ways, keeping us standing firm and confident in God's good care and provision for us.

I think there is way too much guilt and shame in the world already, and none of us needs to come to church and hear a pastor make you feel bad for not reading more scripture. What I would like to do, though, is simply offer a reminder that we have this wonderful gift of God's word which has among its many life-giving benefits the ability to protect us if we learn how to use it. We offer Sunday school and Bible studies and resources in our library because that is how we train each other to use the word of God effectively, not as a weapon to cut others, but in reading it, to let God's word read US. To touch US, and OUR hearts, and keep us standing firm when voices whisper seductive trash into our ears. In 1536, William Tyndale was strangled and burned at the stake for translating the Bible into English. People have suffered and died so that people like us today can have the Bible.

As we put on the full armor of God, all the different parts that God has given, let us take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. But let us be careful how we hold it, because it's sharp, it can cut us to the heart, and it can change our lives if we let it. . .

