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Suit Up! Putting on the Whole Armor of God
A sermon series on Ephesians 6:10-18
Part I (Ephesians 6:10-18, Psalm 91)
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The language of protection is all around us. It seems like there's always something we need to protect ourselves against. I woke up this morning, and even in the seemingly safe environment of my home, I discovered I was surrounded by threats, at least according to the products in my bathroom. For example, my tube of toothpaste says, "Fights Cavities. Fights Tartar. Fights Bad Breath Germs." My stick of deodorant says, "24 Hour Protection." Nowhere does it say WHAT I'm protected from, but whatever it is, it's good for 24 hours! And then there's this: the product line is called Hot Sexy Hair, and this specific item is called "Protect Me." You spray it on your hair after you blow it dry, to protect your hair from the damaging heat of a flat iron. If you don't protect your hair, the heat could break it (and broken hair is not very sexy hair). Already, before I even leave the house, I'm busy protecting myself.

This afternoon, when the Chiefs play the Jaguars, each player will be wearing 20 pounds worth of padding to help protect them from the injuries that seem to be an inevitable part of playing professional football. When a marine goes into combat, they are outfitted in something like \$4,000 worth of combat gear, to make them as invincible as possible.

Wherever we live, whatever we do, we all need some protecting. Today's scripture is all about spiritual protection, which is something we may not think about very much. We think about protecting our children from bullies and predators, protecting our homes from burglars, protecting our assets from losing value, and protecting our health from disease, but spiritual

protection is not something Presbyterians tend to talk about a whole lot. By the end of this sermon series, you'll feel much more comfortable with it.

The author of Ephesians says, "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."

My daughters have started quoting me, which is one of many ways I know I'm getting old. Apparently one of my sayings that has stuck with them to these many years is my comment that "Mayonnaise, bananas, and panty hose are of the devil." And of course, when I say that, all I'm doing is expressing my extreme dislike of these three items. I'm saying that these items are so repugnant to me, that it's like the devil him or herself must have invented them. Which of course is theological nonsense, because the devil can't create anything. The devil, if there is one, can only infect and distort what is already created.

I don't have clear cut answers about who or what the devil is, except to observe that sometimes situations and structures get to a point that it almost feels like there's a malevolent personality lurking within it and behind it. For example, social media. Social media is not evil, in and of itself. We use it here at church to help tell our story and spread the Gospel. Many people use it as an organizing tool to work for justice in the world. Many people find online communities that offer them wonderful support. And of course, it is indispensable for posting pictures of our dogs and kids and vacations. But it seems to be wreaking real havoc on how we relate to each other.

I recently read about a couple who went on a honeymoon, and instead of spending their time enjoying the beach and each other, the bride would spend half of every day shooting, editing, and planning her Instagram posts. She said, "I had to prove to the world that I was having a great time." Meanwhile, her husband described their honeymoon as stressful,

cumbersome, torturous, and a sunset nightmare, to the point that they almost separated after that. (“Honeymoon Hashtag Hell,” *The New York Times*, June 19, 2019). This is just one of many recent stories about how looking like we’re having a good time has become more important than actually having a good time. Which is nothing new, but social media is taking it to new levels. There’s something so pitiful and depressing about this, we might even call it “evil.” I don’t think it’s a coincidence that anxiety and depression have increased as social media has become more and more ingrained into our daily lives. Yet it’s tough to put down, because it is designed to keep us scrolling and clicking.

Opioids are not evil, and neither are pharmacists, doctors, or pharmaceutical companies, but the greed behind the over-prescription and marketing of opioids and the demonization of those who become addicted to them surely is. The numbness and apathy we feel when we hear about the human suffering caused by opioid abuse surely is. Not that we are evil for feeling those things, but you can be sure that “the powers that be” are delighted when we just scroll past these things on our phones, or turn the page, if we read a print paper. They are counting on us to feel helpless and overwhelmed, like I did the other day after reading an article about babies going through withdrawal from opioids when the umbilical cord is cut—not eating, not sleeping, not growing, and screaming inconsolably because their little bodies crave heroin, not milk (Nicholas Kristof, “These Newborn Babies Cry for Drugs, Not Milk,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 7, 2019). [Putting all the blame on the mothers without treating them is too easy, and not helpful.]

Let’s go back to verse 12 in today’s reading: “For 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.” We will dig deep

into this statement in the weeks to come, but for today, I want to emphasize the first part of that: “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh.”

Throughout the letter, the author has stressed, over and over again, that we are all one in Christ. He is writing to Gentile Christians, meaning believers who were not Jewish. This was the biggest division of people in existence at that time. If we think the divide between conservative and liberal Americans is a big deal today, it is small potatoes compared to the divide between Jews and Gentiles in those days. Yet the author boldly claims, “Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Ephesians 2:14).

As we work through our series, looking at the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of readiness to proclaim peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, we will keep coming back to this, that our enemy is not each other. It’s not fellow human beings. If you’re a Democrat, Republicans are not the enemy. If you are passionately anti-abortion, people who are pro-choice are not the enemy. If you hate smoking, smokers are not the enemy. Anybody who says differently is not proclaiming the Gospel.

A final thought about armor . . .

My son-in-law, Ben, is a police officer in Kansas City, MO, and I am learning a little bit about armor from watching him. I’ve learned that in Kansas City, officers are given a standard-issue, bullet-proof vest to wear under their uniform, plus a tool belt for all their equipment, which includes a taser, flashlight, handcuffs, gloves, radio, and medical stuff. But at their own expense, officers can instead choose to wear an outer vest, which costs some hundreds of dollars, depending on the vest. Outer vests have lots of advantages, including pockets for the officer’s

equipment, so that they don't have to wear all of it around their waists. The vest also distributes the weight of all that equipment more evenly, rather than having it all hang on your hips, which is important because all together, it adds up to something like 35 to 40 pounds. Having the equipment stored in the vest also makes it easier for the officer to reach and harder for a criminal to get. And unlike the standard-issue vest, you don't have to wear an outer vest under your clothes, which makes everything much more comfortable. So the message I get loud and clear when Ben describes all of this is, wow—what an officer wears is really, really important. Having a vest that they like is worth the money. The more comfortable and safe they feel, the better they can do their jobs. And that's good for everybody.

I asked Ben if his equipment started to feel like part of him. And he said, “Yeah, kind of. Turning on that cop switch starts every day with me getting into uniform and it's almost ritualistic in some ways. I put everything on in the same order, check my mags, press check my pistol etc.” When I hear him describe it, I can hear the deep sense of responsibility he feels, and the respect he has for himself and his vocation.

What we learn from Ephesians, and what we'll really zoom in on as our series progresses, is that what we wear spiritually is really, really important. Knowing how to put it on and how to use it is critical. Knowing who or what the enemy is, and who he is not, is essential. And knowing that God is with us, that our strength is in the Lord, and not in ourselves, is most important of all.