

Here We Stand 2023

Ephesians 6:11 “Armor of God”

Chaplain (Lt. Colonel) Steven Hokana, Assistant Director of Ministry to the Armed Forces (MAF) (LCMS)
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Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. The basis for today’s meditation is from Paul’s letter to the Church in Ephesus, Ephesians 6:11 (ESV): “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.”

This morning, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul orders us to stand against the schemes of the devil. We do so arrayed in the armor of God given us through our Savior Jesus Christ, the great Commander in Chief, Lord God, King of the Universe. It is Christ who dresses us for battle. We don’t stand in nakedness, loneliness, or isolation. We are not left to our own devices. No, far from it. We are dressed for warfare in the most frightening uniform ever devised. We have weapons that make the enemy melt and fade in defeat and destruction.

Paul paints a picture of a centurion. There was no more powerful or intimidating warrior on an ancient battlefield. The centurion was recognized and feared by friend and foe alike. On his glistening metal helmet was a transverse crest of bristling horsehair. It was spread atop the helmet from ear to ear—not like the helmets we see in Hollywood movies, where it flows from crown to back. On the centurion’s armored chest were silver medals the size of coffee saucers. These were awards conferred by the emperor for crushing the enemies of Rome. Most centurions had numerous such silver medallions.

The centurion carried a standard-issue, heavy, rectangular wooden shield the size of a small door. Powerful! At the center of the shield was a sturdy metal knob. The intent of the shield was not necessarily to defend. Rather, it was an offensive weapon to smash the face of an enemy. Although the centurion had a sword and was likely the best fighter in his company of 100, his tool of choice in combat was a cherished vine-staff. Ancient headstones of centurions

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show carved images of men in full combat armor caressing their prized vine-staffs as if they were newborn babies. The vine-staff was a tool of leadership. In the hand of a trained centurion it held the line; it encouraged a slow-moving legionary to pick up the pace and called in the artillery. The centurion pointed with his vine-staff in the direction to let loose javelins. The results were devastating.

Of course, centurions had belts. These were not used to hold up pants but rather to balance their equipment for the 25-mile marches. The centurion was unique in the Roman army and wore wonderfully ornate shin guards called greaves. These allowed the centurion to stand out from the rest of the soldiers and, if needed, lead his contingent over a wall or across a trench to plow down the enemy. The centurion, like all legionaries, wore specially designed shoes. These were called *caliga* [pronounced “kah-lee-gah”]. If that word sounds familiar, you might be thinking of Caligula, the evil Roman Emperor, whose name means “little boots” in Latin.

At this point, you might be scratching your head and thinking, “Why, on a Life Sunday, are we talking about centurions?” Others may think, “What does Ephesians 6, a passage concerning armor—or weaponry—have to do with the rights of American citizens still in the womb?” The explanation is simple. We are in a war, and our enemy is serious about his intent. We fight against a cunning adversary who seeks to destroy us. His weapons are rooted in evil. The “father of lies” uses deception, self-doubt, infighting, selfishness, and our own fallen nature to destroy the hope given us by our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul tells us: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12 NIV).

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We don't like to talk about evil. We are not comfortable calling something evil. It is nonetheless the situation in which we find ourselves today—surrounded by evil. The fictitious private eye Sherlock Holmes once said: “It is an old maxim of mine that when you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.” So, even though we like to ignore the topic of evil, the truth of its presence cannot be denied.

Evil is at work in our country. We know it and sense the welled-up need to take action. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to “deliver us from evil.” We ask Him to protect us against the callous evil of abortion, the taking of a human life. We are harnessed with the burden of belonging to a nation that practices this barbaric procedure and calls it a “right.” May God have mercy on us.

This is no longer about politics or a polite society. We are losing our way and are brought back only through the love of Christ. St. Augustine said, “We are an Easter people and ‘Alleluia’ is our song.” Yes, we see challenges—sin, death, and the power of the devil are all around us. But we never lose sight of God's wonderful plan of salvation. It is His Son, Jesus, who came into this world to save sinners. It is His resurrection from the dead and the sure promise of life that motivate us to save a dying world and have a voice for the unborn. Thus, we celebrate when a mother has second thoughts concerning abortion and keeps her baby. We sing “Alleluia” when an orphaned child once abandoned is adopted and lives in a home filled with the presence of Christ's love reflected through a mother and father. We actively live out our “Easter identity” as we pray for our leadership to govern wisely, with justice, under the blessings of God. But a thank-filled Easter heart does not minimize the challenge ahead of us. Evil is not confined to distant lands or empires long ago destroyed.

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In the United States, we pride ourselves on being so superior. We have amazing technology, food production, a powerful military, and countless other blessings. We have more comforts now than ever before. We live in relative peace compared with the last 100 years. We should be pursuing art, science, and philosophy. We should be proud to engage in the public square on issues that matter to the soul of the nation and its citizens. We ought to be a moral people--citizens who obtain their rights from God and look to the government for justice.

But think of where we are today. We live in a nation that has no problem defending the “legal right” to kill a child in his or her mother’s womb. We live in a nation in which the parts of the child are sold for medical and research purposes. Many in our country yawn at the horror of abortion. Since the legalization of abortion, the count is up to 63 million dead. We live in a country that aggressively pursues, by way of belligerent litigation in our courts, a group of nuns, “The Little Sisters of the Poor Home of the Aged,” for not signing up for the Affordable Care Act. The Little Sisters will not support the federal government mandate to provide reproductive services for their women. Never mind the fact that most are well beyond childbearing years. Humanity has moved a long way from God’s intent and design for men and women. In his lecture on Genesis, Martin Luther said this about marriage, children and family: “God wanted to teach and attest that the begetting of children is wonderfully pleasing to **him**, in order that we might realize that **he** upholds and defends his Word when he says, ‘Be fruitful.’ He is not hostile to children, as we are.” We live in a country that sues Christian workers who provide for the poor. We are a nation that cannot figure out marriage in light of God’s Word and basic biology. Instead we have rooted marriage in emotion.

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It looks bleak. Many feel helpless as we see the onslaught of moral decay and the sliding away from our Christian roots in the United States. I suppose you can run and hide, perhaps live under a rock, or maybe cut yourself loose from civil society. But please don't explore the option of selling your home and moving to a cave. We have the responsibility as Christian citizens to engage our government. We are called to keep separate the “Two Kingdoms,” as Martin Luther described them. The State, the Kingdom on the Left, is held accountable to God to keep order, punish evil, and allow the Gospel to spread. The Kingdom on the Right is the Church, the Body of Christ where salvation through the cross is lifted high. The church, the Kingdom on the Right, provides the Word, the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. It is the Kingdom on the Right that endures forever, and its head is Jesus Christ. We are called, therefore, to remind our government not to bind our conscience. We are not allowed to stand back and watch children not yet born be killed.

I have good news this morning—news that ties directly with the “armor of God” and our salvation. Here it is: Satan has already lost. He still growls. He still threatens. He still works overtime as we contend with our fallen condition as sinners. But all of what Satan can do—all of his plans, energy, efforts, threats, taunting, tirades, and terrors—are vanquished by God's Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. The armor of God speaks of the seriousness of Satan to attack and try to destroy the **body** of Christ. The armor points to God's magnificent plan of salvation. The full armor of God is a gift.

Even more, without Christ, all the armor of God is meaningless and useless. Without Jesus, the armor would be nothing but a burden. It is because of Christ that we are emboldened

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with armor and weapons that will not fail. The emphasis and focus are always on Jesus. The same Jesus was promised by God at the very beginning of time in the Garden of Eden. He was spoken of with longing and hope throughout the Old Testament, culminating with His coming into the world, born of a Virgin, teaching, preaching, and fulfilling the Old Testament promises of victory over death. He calls out to us with deep compassion to come to Him to find hope, assurance, peace, and rest for our unsettled hearts.

The way ahead will not be easy. But the victory is already won in Christ. We continue to work here on earth until Christ returns. But between now and His second coming, we have the responsibility to tell our neighbor, our community, our state, and our country that the lives of the unborn must be protected. With prayer and fervent acts of mercy, we reach out to those who see abortion as an alternative. We help those driven to despair by social upheaval and point them to the cross. We show them the love of Christ by caring for them, offering shelter, providing adoption services, and living as God-pleasing examples of a “good neighbor.”

The combat gear extended to us by Christ so that we might stand firm in battle is not made of metal, wood, steel, and leather. Rather, our armor spiritually equips us to stand firm against the enemies of God and His holy purposes. We battle against “the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

As children of God, redeemed under Christ, we stand firm wearing truth, righteousness, the Gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the Word of God. With these weapons, we march in love. We move out and seek to capture those sickened by sin, blinded by selfishness, broken and in need of a Savior. To this end, may we find ourselves worthy to wear the uniform given us by

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our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May we stand firm, hold our ground, and bring good news to a
troubled world. Amen.