

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Ready for Action”

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Ephesians 6:10-20

The Whole Armour of God

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For 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. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

18 Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Annie Dillard, in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, writes about the 19th century Franklin Expedition which tried to map out a passage to Asia through the Arctic. The expedition sailed in reinforced wooden boats, hulls capable of withstanding collisions with ice bergs. The boats themselves were powered by a steam engine and heated with the same steam. There was enough food on board to feed the entire crew for five years, even though the trip was supposed to take around three years to complete. The expedition took much of the finest of life with them including a 1,200 book library, a hand organ playing 50 tunes, china place settings for the officers and men, cut glass wine goblets, and sterling silver flatware.

However the leaders of the group failed to prepare for some things. Their canned food was improperly packaged, causing lead poisoning and botulism. They carried no special clothing for the Arctic, only the uniforms of Her Majesty's Navy. Finally when the boat jammed in the ice, some of the men attempted to drag a 1200 pound lifeboat across the ice, carrying with them necessities such as handkerchiefs, perfumed soap, books, tea and chocolate. Throughout history, the failure of this expedition has been lifted up as a prime example of lack of preparation and planning.

Dillard asks us to imagine the folly of heading into such an adventure with such lack of foresight.

I recall an evening several years ago when I attended a Salt Lake Stingers baseball game. It was one of the most interesting nights I have ever spent at a ballpark. It was a beautiful July evening. As the game began there was not a cloud in the sky. That was nothing abnormal, it hardly ever rains in Salt Lake City in July. But as the game went on some dark clouds began to form, first over the mountains then moving toward the baseball stadium. The weather indeed began to look menacing.

At the end of the sixth inning, the sky was black. Lightning flashed. Rain began to pour on the diamond. The crowd ran for safety and shelter. The stadium grounds crew, numbering only seven people- because after all- you don't need more than seven people if it doesn't rain in Salt Lake City, placed protective tarps over home plate and the pitcher's mound. Then these seven men began to try to pull the huge field tarp across the infield. It appeared that the tarp had been rolled much too loosely on its spool, perhaps the result of someone being in too much of a hurry the last time it was used. Because of that it was much too heavy for the number of hands available. Next they brought out a lawn tractor and connected a rope to the tarp. The rope was much too weak and snapped. The rain continued to fall in buckets. After about ten minutes of comical yet compelling struggle, the crew finally got the tarp on the field. Unfortunately it was crooked and didn't cover everything that needed to be covered. By then the weight of the rain upon the tarp made it impossible to move another inch. The uncovered infield clay was becoming like grease.

The show was really just beginning. It was Thirsty Thursday and several fans emboldened by the cheap beer ran onto the field to use the tarp as a giant slip and slide. The seven ground crew members were called upon to chase the intruders down. Although it was highly entertaining, there were clearly not enough athletic crew members to pursue and tackle the trespassers. More and more people came out of the stands to join in the slippery fun. After about fifteen minutes, several of Salt Lake City's finest walked out of the right field bullpen, dressed in full riot gear, called in to stop the rainy revelry. Their presence alone moved some fans back to their seats while others felt the force of a billyclub and handcuffs.

About the time several fans were hauled away for prosecution, the rain stopped. The tarp was squeegeed and then pulled off to reveal a completely unplayable field. The game was called. The home team took the loss. The visitors won by forfeit. And when the season ended, the Salt Lake Stingers lost the division by one game. They lost because of the lack of preparation and readiness of the stadium ground crew.

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul writes words of encouragement to the early Christian community. They were a church and faith under attack. They were battling legal and cultural authorities who threatened their existence. Persecution was rampant. To be a Christian was to place yourself at risk. But Paul writes of an even larger foe. Paul speaks of a cosmic struggle with "the powers of this present darkness," the powers of evil and chaos against which the Christian cannot stand alone. Instead of institutional problems, Paul believed that it was in the everyday temptations and choices that believers in Christ faced their greatest test of faith.

Paul offers encouragement through the use of a military metaphor. He writes that in order to face the powers of darkness, one must be prepared. One must prepare

by donning spiritual armor- “the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. Paul doesn’t identify prayer as a piece of armor but speaks of it as something like a spray-on sealant that goes over the rest of the protection, like a cover for your Ipod or cell phone if you will.

The armor that Paul describes is akin to putting upon your everyday life, the cloak of God’s presence. It is putting on the truth in a time of easy falsehood. It is doing justice when doing something a bit shady might favor us. It is working for peace in a world that seems to seek only war and violence. It is seeking the face of the ultimate in a culture that worships the gods of oat bran, Facebook, and Gold’s Gym, finding salvation in the hallowed halls of possession, pleasure, science, and knowledge. It is acknowledging that God is needed to face the forces that we encounter in our life and in our world. It is watchfulness, preparation, and readiness.

Paul’s advice is to be ready, to prepare for action by strengthening your faith. Develop disciplines, habits, skills, practices that bring you closer to finding the presence of God and understanding God’s intention for your life. Paul writes that if you plan to win a contest of faith, you can’t simply assume that sunny days and easy choices will always happen. Perhaps that is what draws us here today, and brings us back each week. We are wise enough to know that we are not able to live in this world without some sort of encouragement, some type of armor of faith, some sort of preparation for life’s battle.

We might know also that discipleship just doesn’t happen. We just can’t go into life’s experiences expecting to be people perfect in faith. Prayer, discernment, revelation and discovering God’s intention just don’t come easy. It takes intentional study, regular practice, and the reinforcement of the fellowship of Christ. You have to prepare and you have to exercise.

In his book *How to Talk so People Will Listen*, Steve Brown relates a story told him by Richard Nixon. Nixon was once speaking with the son of Winston Churchill, telling the son how much he admired the great prime minister’s ability to give an extemporaneous speech. Churchill’s son replied, “Oh, yes. I’ve watched my father work for hours preparing those extemporaneous speeches.”

Paul urges us to prepare for action. In what lies ahead, we will not be able to stand alone. We will need what our loving God provides to hold strong in our faith. We cannot assume that our faith will come naturally and that we can maintain it through trials and temptations without some sort of exercise, discipline and preparation. We need to pick up the sword and shield. We need to be attentive to the armor of prayer, fellowship, and worship.

God wants all of us to participate in the contest that is our life of faith. And God wants us to do the preparation and training we need to be ready for action- using what God provides, to make the most of what may lie ahead.