

Armor of God: Gospel of Peace

May 5, 2024

Pastor John Mars

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church. For the fifth Sunday in a row, we are going to read Ephesians, chapter 6, verses 10 through 18.

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. 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. Therefore put on the whole armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” May God bless the reading of His Word.

I grew up “old school.” That sounds kind of redundant, given my age. But what I mean by that is: I was born to my parents late in life. My dad was in his late 30s; my mother was in her mid-40s. And so, I was raised “old school” sixty years ago. I can remember my Navy officer father saying, “I run a democratic household, but I get 51% of the votes!” Until I was in the ninth grade, I had no control over how I wore my hair, what kind of shoes I wore, or what clothes I wore. My dad, his entire life, had a crew cut. Guess what I had, until I was in the ninth grade. And for shoes, I had tennis shoes, or there was a couple of years I had seamen’s deck shoes Those were the shoes that sailors wore aboard ship. They’re hideous! But when I got to the ninth grade, my dad said, “You can wear your hair the way you want to, to a degree, and you can wear whatever shoes you want to and whatever clothes you want to, provided you buy them.” And I did! I grew my hair out. My dad wouldn’t let it get below my ears, but it was down to my earlobes. And the first thing I bought, as far as footwear goes, guess what? Cowboy boots! Yes, indeed! And I wore that throughout high school.

And right after I graduated from high school, God threw me a curve. He called me into ministry. And I never dreamed that that would happen, but it did. And I didn’t know really how to act. I was very fortunate that I had some really good mentors that helped me in ministry. And in my junior year, something very strange happened. You see, I figured with my temperament and my likes and dislikes, I would be a foreign missionary, probably somewhere in Africa or the Amazon or in the Arctic somewhere, away from people, you know. But when I was a junior in college, in one week I had two churches call me, contact me, and ask me if I would interview to be their pastor. The same week. I chose one of them, went out and preached for them, and interviewed with them, and they hired me on the spot. And all of a sudden, I found myself moving out of the married dorms at the University of Southern Mississippi and into the parsonage in a little church way out in the sticks. Now, at this point in my life, I had never served on a committee in a church. I had never been in leadership in any form in a church. And I found myself the

pastor of a church. And I was like, "Help!" And I called people that I knew were good pastors, and I said, "You've got to help me." And I sat down with one of my mentors, one of the ones that I admired the most. I said, "What do I do?" He said, "Well, John, number one, the hair has got to go. And number two, the boots have got to go." So, I cut my hair. I put away my cowboy boots. I got me a pair of penny loafers to wear during the week and a pair of dress shoes to wear on Sundays, and for the next four years, I was absolutely miserable. I felt like an impostor because I wasn't being me. And I prayed about it. And I thought about it. And I cried about it. And I can remember saying to God, "God, if this is what being a pastor is all about, I don't know that I can do it." And one day, in a time of prayer, in a time of meditation, I had one of the rare occurrences that happens to me on occasion (it doesn't happen very often). God spoke to me. Now, God is always speaking to me in different forms, in different ways, but I have never heard the audible voice of God. But as surely, as clearly, as I am speaking to you right now, God said to me, "If I had wanted somebody else, I would have called somebody else." And to the best of my knowledge, I have never worn a pair of shoes in the pulpit again! I have worn cowboy boots ever since. And I want to say something to you. This is not the sermon. This is free; I won't charge you for this. But what is true for me is also true for you. If God had wanted somebody else, God is perfectly capable of creating somebody else. God wanted you: you, with all your uniqueness, with your gifts, your graces, and your weirdness! God wants you; so dare to be you! I say all of that to say this: this is kind of who I am. What you see is what you get: foundational.

And today we're talking about foundation. We're talking about the feet. Feet, fitted with a readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. Feet, fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, a peace that brings peace between us and God, and peace that brings peace between us and humanity. Ours is the gospel of peace. I hear that term, "gospel of peace," very often in Christian circles. Did you know that this is the only place that it appears in all of Scripture? This is the only place that appears in all of Scripture. Ours is the gospel of peace. Are you surprised any that we are armed with peace? Part of our armor is the gospel of peace. And we'll come back to this in just a few moments.

But just to recap on the armor of God: Paul writes to the area around Ephesus, knowing that they are going to go through troubles and trials, knowing that they are going to experience tragedies and temptations. And he says to them, "Be strong in God's strength and put on the full armor of God." He reminds them it's not their strength that they stand in; it's not their armor that they put on. But rather, God gives us these tools to help us to stand in our world. We must first, Paul says, put on the belt of truth. And the belt of truth is none other than Jesus Christ, as revealed to us through the Holy Spirit. The last thing that Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew, chapter 28, he said, "Remember, I am with you always, even until the very end." And the way Jesus does that is through the Holy Spirit. We give lip service to that, saying we believe that God is with us always. But we often don't act like it. We don't expect God to work in our lives. We don't expect God to speak in our lives. But we should expect God to speak, expect God to work. As we would say in the South, "We should expect God to show up and show out." Put on the belt of truth.

Last week, Pastor Aaron talked to us about the breastplate of righteousness, that we do not have to depend on our own righteousness for salvation, but we depend on Jesus' righteousness for our salvation. We don't depend on our own goodness for salvation, we depend on Christ's goodness for salvation. We do not earn our own salvation, but

Jesus paid for our salvation. We are saved by grace through faith: God's grace, our faith. Now, "grace" in Greek means "gift." So, God's grace is God's gift to us. It's not something that we earn; it's something that we accept. It is God's unmerited favor bestowed on the undeserving. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and today, our feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. Fitted means ready to go: ready to go, ready to share the gospel of peace. That means you got your boots on. It means you're ready, always prepared to share the peace that we have, the peace that we have with God because of the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness. We are ready to go. Yes, there are more elements to the arsenal. Yes, there are more tools for us to have, but these are the basics. And we are ready with the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and our feet fitted with readiness of the gospel of peace. If you wait till you are fully equipped, you will never get started. Y'all hear me? If you wait till you feel adequate, if you wait till you have all of the armor, you won't ever start. This is enough to get started. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. Ready to go wherever God commands.

I'll pause here for just a moment. I almost didn't join the United Methodist Church because of that right there. Let me explain. There are two things, when I made the transition from the Baptist Church to the Methodist Church, that I struggled with. Number one was baptism. To Baptists, that means immersion; and we sprinkle. I had to reconcile myself with that. And then there's this little thing in the United Methodist Church called "itinerancy." My wife is laughing right now because she knows where I'm going. That means that a bishop can call me up today and say, "Congratulations, John! You're going to Wagontire, Oregon, population 3." Right after Jeannine and I got married, we went through this over and over again. And I used to say, "Baby, I just got a call from the District Superintendent," and she goes, "Ohhh!" and I'd go, "No, I didn't!" But then one day, I did. That's itinerancy. And I have been moved all over the West, and I can tell you every one of those moves has been a good move, and God has blessed. We have to be ready to go when God calls, ready to share the gospel of peace, ready with good news, not bad news.

Our message, our gospel, our good news, is peace. Our goal, as Aaron tells us every Sunday, our goal, our mission, is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. That is our goal. It's not to win arguments. You can be right; you can win an argument; you can prove your point and lose. There is a segment of Christianity that may be technically right, but they're also repulsive. Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. There's a Christian comedian that used to say, "The mighty army of God, who has been given all the armor that it needs, is the only army in the world that spends the vast majority of its time either shining its armor or fighting one another. And it is the only army in the world that has the horrible habit of shooting its wounded." Our message, our gospel, is the gospel of peace. Now, I have been throwing that word around an awful lot: peace. But what does peace mean? From a biblical standpoint, what does peace mean? In the West (I'm not talking about the western United States; I'm talking about the West as opposed to the East), in the West when we think of the word "peace," we think of the absence of trouble, and we think of tranquil. In Hebrew thought, the word for peace is shalom. Shalom is both a greeting and a salutation, just like aloha is. It's a greeting and a salutation. But shalom never means the absence of trouble. It never means tranquil. If I say "Shalom" to you, what I am saying is: I wish for you, I pray for you, my desire for you is that you have everything that makes for your greatest good. You have everything that makes for your greatest good. And if you need your boat rocked, I won't just rock

your boat, I will turn it over. That's shalom. That is peace. I desire for you everything that makes for your greatest good. And that is our gospel. Our gospel is to share a peace that makes for others' greatest good. Jesus Christ gives us peace with God, and it is our privilege, when God calls, to share that peace with others. And we make our world a better place. Our message makes right relationships between us and God, and us and humanity. We are peacemakers, not troublemakers. We create right relationships with God and right relationships with humankind.

We are fitted. We are fitted. We've got our boots on. Are you ready to go? Are you ready to make the world a better place? Are you ready to make a difference in other people's lives? Are you ready to share the peace that you have experienced in God with others? If you have the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness, and if you have the gospel of peace, you're ready to go. Let's go.

Let's pray.

Lord, give us courage to make peace. Give us courage, Lord, to be peace. Give us courage, Lord, to get started. In Christ's name, amen.