

9 PENTECOST  
AUGUST 5/6, 2017

FIRST, MARSHALL  
PR. SCOTT FULLER

Ephesians 6:10-20; Luke 21:25-33

*Stand Firm*

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*



As you heard in the words of our bible passage from Ephesians, Paul encourages us to *put on the whole armor of God* (Eph. 6:11). Such protection includes:

- the belt of *truth*
- the vest of *righteousness*
- the shield of *faith*
- the helmet of *salvation*
- and the sword of the *Spirit* which, as Paul tells us, is the *Word of God*.

This armor, he assures us, will help us *stand* – a word he uses 4 times in 4 verses:

-stand against (v. 11); withstand (v. 13); stand firm (v. 13); stand (v. 14)

Armor and standing...armor and standing...

As kids, my next-younger brother and I would sometimes make *swords* and *shields* and **stand** toe to toe in battle.

-We'd take 1 X 2's and whittle 'em into *blades* of a sort,

-nail on a piece of wood as a *guard* for the *grip*.

-Then we'd cut *shields* out of plywood, drill holes in the center  
and thread them with pieces of rope that we could hold onto.

-Then we'd put on football helmets, and step out into...

*the ancient colosseum of Rome* (...our front yard).

There we'd stand, ready to **fight to the death** (or for the 90 seconds it took before one – or both! – of our swords broke!).

**Name some jobs that require true body armor or protective gear:**

Law Enforcement Officers

Firefighters

Soldiers

Construction workers

Scientists

X-ray Techs

Astronauts

Divers

Doctors

Such people sometimes need their gear as protection against:

-enemies who might try to hurt them;

-elements that might be harmful to them; or

-situations that might be dangerous to their health or someone else's.

Such armor truly helps these folks stand firm in the face of danger, and stand up to help those who can't protect themselves.

So I find it interesting in our Gospel passage from Luke when Jesus tells his disciples – and all of us – to do something fairly illogical...very daring... certainly counter-intuitive.

-When hardships happen,  
 -when ordeals overtake us,  
 -when grief threatens to grind us into the ground...  
 instead of giving up, or giving in...Jesus commands us to ***stand up and raise our heads...because our redemption is drawing near*** (Luke 21:28).

*Isn't that a strange kind of message to share with people in dire situations?*

Normally, it's a word that you hear:

-when the **cavalry** arrives,  
 -when the **EMT's** show up,  
 -when the **good guys** in the **white hats** ride up to **save the day**...

It's **not** what we want to hear when we find ourselves:

-surrounded by enemies,  
 -threatened by failure, or  
 -knocked to the ground by trials that turn us upside down and inside out.

At **those** times we're tempted:

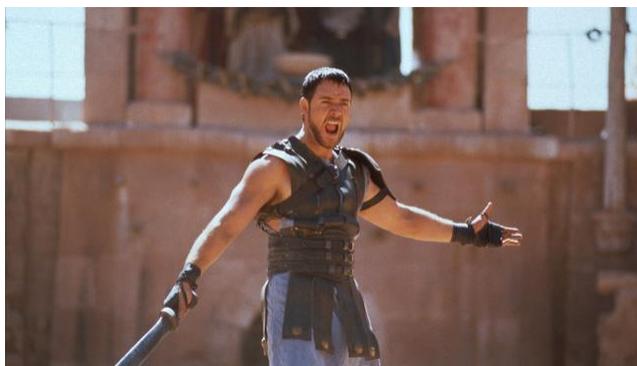
-to cut and run,  
 -to retreat and reorganize,  
 -to count our losses and prepare for what **else** is coming down the pike.

But here Jesus says: ***Not so fast!*** He tells us: ***Stand up and raise your heads, ...for your redemption is drawing near...*** So maybe the Lord's **not** talking about saving us **from** our troubles...but about equipping us to **stand** and **face** life's struggles...

Now **that** is something radically different if we know that **God** is

- by our **side**,
  - giving us **strength**,
  - giving us **hope**,
  - giving us the **courage** that's needed to meet the challenges of the day.
- Maybe **that's** the purpose of the armor that Paul talks about in Ephesians.

So...with this theme of armor, and knowing about my childhood fantasies of sword-fighting, I'm sure it comes as no surprise to hear that one of my all-time favorite movies is Gladiator from the year 2000...



Russell Crowe plays Maximus, a powerful Roman general, who's loved:

- by his soldiers,
- by the people and
- by the aging Emperor, Marcus Aurelius.

In fact, right before his death, the Emperor actually chooses Maximus to be his heir instead of his own twisted son, Commodus. But the jilted son kills his father, seizes power and condemns Maximus and his family to death.

The general manages to escape, but is unable to save his family. With this blow, he loses his will to live, is captured as a slave, and forced to fight in the Gladiator games. Having accepted his fate, Maximus decides to embrace it – rise to the top and just maybe have the chance to face the evil emperor, take his revenge and return the rule of Rome to the Senate (based on a summary by Chris "Morphy" Terry - <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0172495/>).

The gladiator's physical armor is prominently featured in the movie... Maximus cuts a stunning figure as a fighter. Yet it's never the key to his success in the arena. Instead, this general-turned-gladiator reflects a lot of what the Apostle Paul talks about in his letter to the Ephesians: the whole armor of God is **not** about sharp swords, hard steel, and piercing spears to **kill** the enemy... Instead, it's about **standing firm** on the solid ground of **truth**, **embracing** the righteousness of **grace**, and **living by** the blessing of **faith**... in God who promises to be our help and our assurance.

Ironically, though our world **claims** to **value** such beautiful ideals... they usually only mean something when a **good** person **dies** trying to defend them, or refuses to **win-at-all-costs** by sacrificing them.

That's why it's vital for us to know that Paul's **not** talking about putting on armor to fight **evil** on the **world's** terms. We have to be clear about what the whole armor of God **does** – and does **not** do – for us. God's armor is **not** made up of **offensive armaments**. We cannot stand firm in the armor of God and be **invincible** as we set out to **destroy** the **powers** of **evil**. Again, **no one** can defeat evil by using worldly power...



This is a truth that Jesus knew through and through:

- it's what he believed in and lived for,
- it's what he preached and died for...

There's no fighting fire with fire when it comes to doing battle with evil... victory can only be won through...death...and resurrection.

So...with my head full of these images and themes: honor and death, **armor** and Gladiator, I was intrigued to hear about the modern version of this type of movie, Wonder Woman... Now, truth be told, I wasn't the **first** in our family to want to go see it... I must confess that in my Montana born-and-bred psyche, it seemed a bit of a stretch to leap from Gladiator to Wonder Woman...

However, my wife, who saw the show with our daughter just a short time ago, assured me that I'd enjoy it. And, as usual, she was right. In fact, I was thoroughly impressed with how they made the story work.



Spoiler alert for any of you who haven't seen it: Wonder Woman turns out to be a child of Zeus, the Greek father-god. This makes her the sister of **Ares**, the **evil God of War**. He tries to convince his sister to join his side, and destroy all human beings. He confesses that he's been arming them with weapons of mass destruction so that they'll wipe each other out. He wants to be rid of humanity's petty regimes, selfish dreams, and self-serving schemes.

Toward that goal, he weaves a beautiful vision for his supernatural sister. From the ashes of war, he conjures up a sort of Garden of Eden that's stunningly beautiful... absolutely peaceful...and utterly wonderful because...it's undamaged by human greed...and...empty of human beings...

But, where **Ares** is committed to killing all humans, Wonder Woman sees in them something that her brother never will: the mysterious quality that is the best part of humanity. She knows that:

- though there's evil in the world, and
- though there're selfish people in the world, and
- though the **best** humans are at best **conflicted** and at **worst** their own worst enemies...

**still** she chooses to side with **human weakness** *and* the *blessing of faith* rather than with worldly power and weapons of destruction...

She tells her enemy: *I learned that inside every person, there will always be both darkness and light...*

*It's a choice that each person must make for themselves - something no hero will ever defeat. She continues, I've touched the darkness that lives in-between the light...I've:*

*-seen the worst of this world, and the best...*

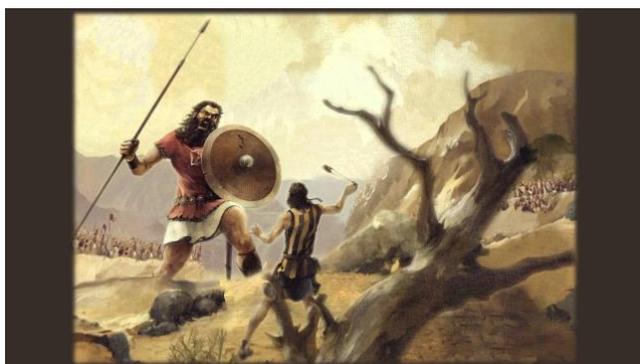
*-seen the terrible things men do to each other in the name of hatred, and the lengths that they'll go to for love.*

*Now I know...that **only love can save this world.***

*For that reason, I stay, I fight, and I give... for the world I know that can be. This is my mission, now, and forever... (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451279/quotes).*

At a very real point, the challenge for you and me is fundamentally the same. The temptation will be:

- to **trust** in the **armor** rather than in the One who **supplies** it,
- to **rely on** our abilities rather than turn to **God**,
- to have **faith** in our **instincts** rather than in the Spirit's **inspiration**.



Do you remember the story of the boy, David, facing off against the giant, Goliath (I Samuel 17)?

Israel's enemy, the Philistines, have come to fight, and on their side is a giant of a man who stands reportedly between 7-9 feet tall (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goliath>).

Daily he struts out and taunts the Israelites, challenging them to send their best warrior to fight *mano a mano*. Daily the Israelite soldiers stand there silent, wrapped in a mantle of fear, heads bowed in shame.

One day, David, the shepherd boy, is sent to the front lines with supplies. Terribly disturbed by the spectacle he sees, the young boy chastises his older brothers and the other soldiers, saying that God would certainly provide them with a victory if they were just brave enough to engage in battle. But they dismiss him...until his words reach the ears of the king.

King Saul listens to David's appeal, and then allows the youth to face the giant in battle. But he insists that the boy must be dressed with the king's own armor: a heavy sword, a weighty helmet and a vest of thick chain mail...

Yet, **none** of **these** things offer the protection the boy needs – and **all** of them only cause him to **stumble** as he tries walking toward his destiny. Finally, David discards the armor and picks up what he knows best: the simple tools of his shepherd's trade: a staff, five smooth stones, and a sling shot.

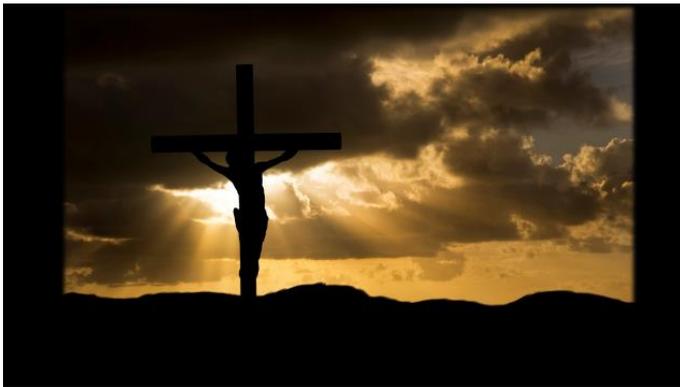
The giant Goliath is **insulted** when this skinny little kid steps out to face him on the field of battle...the big man heaps insults on both the boy and the whole Israelite army. But David never falters. In fact, he says to the warrior: *You came to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts...and who wins the battle?*

The realities of this world in which we live are less about what everyone **perceives** to be true, and **more** about what **God** says ***is*** true. We know that ***power is might***, and that ***might makes right***...we see that scenario played out day in and day out throughout our lives.

And yet...and yet...deep down we've **heard** enough, **read** enough, **seen** enough to know that such a truth is not always ***the truth***...is, in fact, **RARELY *the truth***.

And, that though it often seems like the **only** power that's true is one that can:

- physically overcome our opponents,
- conquer our combatants,
- defeat our foes...
- rarely is a win like that a victory,
- usually it comes with a very expensive price, and almost always
- it costs us a significant piece of our hearts, our honor, our lives.



So it was – and is – for us. Later in Luke's gospel we're told about how Jesus is brought to stand:

- before his accusers,
- before Pontius Pilate,
- before King Herod, and
- before the people who cry out for his crucifixion...

Yet still the Lord: forsakes the sword,  
 -refuses to take up arms, and  
 -will not **fight** his opponents in order to defeat them.

Instead he stands there – firm – clothed only in these things:

- the belt of truth
- the vest of righteousness
- the shield of faith
- the helmet of salvation
- and the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God...

And here is what that sword, the Word of God says through Paul in I Corinthians 13:13 *Now faith, hope and love abide, these three – and the greatest of these is love.*

And, says Jesus in John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

Jesus' word for us today is this: **Stand firm** on this promise: ***For God so loved the world...*** it will serve you very well AND it will serve the world very well through you....

Thanks be to God. Amen.