

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Ephesians 6:10-20

Battle-Ready

Are you battle-ready? Battles are no game. Sure, we might romanticize them as a youth, but stop one of our battle-hardened veterans after the service and ask them what they think about battles. They can tell you of the wounds they bear, the comrades they lost, and the mental anguish that plagued their every waking moment, that all too often still takes captive their dreams. Battles mark the direst of hours.

Knowing is half the battle, so know your enemy. He is a sociopathic scoundrel who wants nothing more than to destroy. Damned already, he'll nonetheless be damned if you aren't as well. He will spare no expense. He will leave no stone unturned as he looks for flaws in your armor. He will dismiss no tactic as too conniving or unjust. He wants your death, plain and simple, and he will not stop until he gets it. He makes war with the Taliban look like a pillow fight at a slumber party, and Al-Queda fighters like doting grandmothers. Even worse, he seeks to destroy you for worlds to come, and not only for this one.

So here we are, left with prayer and a pile of armor. What are we to do with all this battle gear? None of it will do any good if we put it on wrong. None of it will do any good if we don't know how to use it. Prayer and a pile of armor: what now?

First comes truth. Stand firm with truth buckled around your waste. It keeps you from tripping over your coat tails. Without it you are handicapped, immobile, easy pray for the vicious foe. Like wild wolves, he likes nothing more than a slow sheep. Truth or dare may be a fun game, but this is truth or die.

Go with the breastplate of righteousness in place. Righteousness is defensive. It is given you by the Father through the Son. This breastplate was placed upon your breast, together with the sign of the cross, in Holy Baptism, to prepare you for battle. You were baptized into this struggle. Make sure that same breastplate is still in place, polished and repaired by Absolution. Your heart is your life, and, unless Christ protects it, death will eat it whole.

Your feet must also be fitted; they must be fitted with the gospel of peace, which gives readiness. The gospel pronounces righteous. The gospel creates faith. The gospel grants peace. *"If God be for us, who can be against us?"* To be at peace with God is to be at peace when peace cannot be found, when the battle rages.

"Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one." Faith is defensive. We do not wield faith; we hide behind it. The Word is our sword. Faith is our God-given shield. Faith bears upon it the emblem of the Savior whose benefits it makes our own: the cross. Take care of that shield, lest it grow rusty and tattered, unable to protect you much longer.

But a body with no head doesn't fight so well, does it? St. Paul tells us also to take the helmet of salvation. Salvation also is defensive. It protects your head, which guides your every thought, word, and deed. You live and fight, not as one who hopes to be saved, but as one who has been saved. This is our confidence. *"Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us, we tremble not, we fear no ill; they shall not overpower us."* (*A Mighty Fortress*, verse 3).

Now the sword. Offense is important, but offense without defense spells defeat. We're tempted to want the sword first, but it's given to us last. No swinging the sword until we're ready. A sword is a dangerous weapon. If swung wildly, or without training, it can kill the one who bears it just as easily as the enemy. We must swing it rightly, distinguishing law from gospel, threat from promise, condemnation from comfort. Friendly fire is as deadly as enemy fire. A weapon able to divide joints and marrow is not a toy. This battle is not a video game. There is no reset button.

So be ready. God's service is your boot camp. One doesn't always enjoy boot camp, in fact, one often doesn't like it at all, but boot camp isn't meant for enjoyment so much as training. To think boot camp ought to be fun is to think of death but lightly. Wiser men with more perspective who wish the best for the soldier and know the danger of the battle have realized this. The better-trained soldier is the better soldier. An untrained soldier is a dead man in camouflage. Boot camp is supposed to push you. If we tried to make it more fun and less fitness, more fluff and less focus it would only make you fodder for the battlefield.

So we're dressed, with sword in hand, but St. Paul would not send us off just yet. There is one thing left. Pray. *Pray on all occasions and with all requests*, just as your Substitute did, even to the point of sweating drops like blood as He waged war with the Evil One in the wilderness, in the garden, and upon the cross. If faith is our shield, and if the Word is our sword, prayer is our line to the General. Pray for your army. Pray for your captains. Pray for your comrades. Pray for the AWOL. Pray often and for all.

Now be alert. *"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."* He doesn't want a bite out of you. He wants to swallow you whole. Be ready, and when he attacks, swing back with every promise of God, with all the confidence of salvation, and with all the fervor of faith. He has been overcome. This battle is just to remind him of that. This battle is just to demonstrate the victory that is already Christ's, and therefore yours through faith. So stand firm. The devil isn't messing around, and neither should we. We processed in with what victory looked like for our Savior [crucifix]. May we leave today knowing that the battle may be just as ugly for us, yet confident that our enemy's head is crushed and that our Body is well-protected, for our shield bears this triumphant sign, the banner under which the hosts of heaven fight with us, the trophy of God's love. Amen.