

Dear members and friends of St. John Lutheran,

St. Paul finishes his great letter to the church in Ephesus, with the following words of warning and encouragement:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵ and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; ¹⁷ and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, ¹⁸ praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. (Ephesians 6:10-18, ESV).

There's amazing insight in these verses on the Christian life. First, let's examine what is the real cause of conflict and misery on the earth. "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood" – the battle ground of which the church finds itself located is a **spiritual battleground between the cosmic forces of good and evil**. This is difficult to understand, since we cannot see the fight taking place directly – but indirectly we see it all around us. We see it in broken relationships and divorce, disputes and wars between countries, poverty and famine, and laws that contradict what the Bible teaches (like abortion and same-sex marriage). When we look at the world, it appears that there is no organization to the chaos – it's everywhere. But given our understanding that Satan and his minion are hard at work – what are they trying to accomplish?

There is a battle for the hearts and minds of children. We're reminded of 1st Peter 5: *Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world (ESV).* Satan is after one thing and one thing only: To bring as many souls as he can into hell. That's why the training up of our children is so important (see the related article in this newsletter on *protecting your child*).

Of course, Satan also desires to **destroy the church**. The battle enters the church when the church is accomplishing what God desires – people are being brought to faith through the truthful preaching and teaching of God's Word, and the correct administration of the Sacraments. God is bringing new members to St. John. We're building up the Body of Christ – and that's a direct threat to Satan. We must expect the attack to come to us.

At this point it easy to throw up the hands and say, "It's all over. **How can we stand against an invisible and powerful adversary?**" St. Paul gives us insight here. He writes, "*In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one (v. 16)*" This text is telling us that faith is our greatest protection in this cosmic battle. If faith is the ultimate protection, would it not be wise to enter the battle with the best

shield? Would you like to enter the battle with a shield the size of a postage stamp, or one that can protect you from head to toe?

Faith is strengthened by God's Holy Word and the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Let's examine how the Word comes to you. What does ***your Bible study*** look like **during the week** - not on Sunday – but during the week? If you were in Iraq or Afghanistan right now as a warrior, you would most assuredly have on body armor. **Right now, this very instant, you're in the middle of a spiritual battle, and the body armor is God's Word. You can't afford to take this lightly.** Satan's forces will choose the weak to bring havoc and trouble to our family, friends, and God's church. The result is that Christians must be prepared to fend off those that would unwittingly bring trouble and problems to our doorstep. God's Holy Word is our rock, or fortress. When we're in Bible study daily, we are strengthened in faith, and have the strength of our Father in heaven to confront those that would disrupt and destroy our loved ones and ourselves.

Next, we read these words, "*take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (v. 17)*" Here we have an understanding that **we are to be on the offensive.** A soldier doesn't pick up a sword for defense only. A shield, yes – but not a sword. No, a soldier picks up a sword to engage in the fight. The Word of God is the sword. **We fend off attacks and fight back with God's Word.** Again, the bigger the weapon (faith), the better we are at protecting those around us. A pastor friend uses this analogy: Would you rather enter the battle with a stick-pin or an Excalibur sword? I'll take the sword, thank you. So Bible study and worship (including Holy Communion) grows us up in God's Word and gives us a better weapon against our enemy.

Finally, we read: "*praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication (v. 18)*" Ultimately, **our strength comes from our God.** We must be in prayer many times a day, seeking help, and asking God to silence those that would harm our family and the church. We must ask God to be actively involved in our lives as well, so that we don't fall prey to the evil one's tricks.

It's important that we never forget that **our Lord is more powerful than Satan.** We don't have to live in fear of this cosmic battle, but that doesn't mean we can ignore it either. We must be in God's Word, in worship weekly, and actively praying for our family, our congregation, and its leaders. We can take comfort in these words: *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.* The victory was won for us on the cross of Calvary. Stand firm in the Lord, and we will prevail. That's a guarantee from the Creator of the Universe.

Pastor Travis