

SERMON

SECOND
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

460 East Main Street

Lexington, Kentucky 40507

“Stand!”

Psalm 34: 15-22; Ephesians 6:10-20

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I cannot tell you what a pleasure it is to speak to you as we enter this most joyous season of the year—by which I mean, of course, football season. Although in truth my enthusiasm is somewhat dampened by this question: “What do the UK men’s basketball and football team have in common?” Neither of them is very good at football.

That said, I am also a Cleveland Browns fan. Our perennial battle cry is: “Wait ‘til next year!” Friends, here is the thing: I am 57. I’m not sure how many years I have left to wait. I suppose it could be worse. I could be like the lifelong fan who actually wrote the Browns into his will. He requested that at his funeral the offensive line serve as his pallbearers. It seems he wanted them to let him down just one last time. We laugh to keep from crying...

Why on earth am I talking football? Because it is the first place my thinking goes as I read the writer of Ephesians exhort his audience to “put on the whole armor of God.” It is the best bridge I can find to the paraphernalia he names. I don’t know about you, but I haven’t seen many breastplates lately. When I hear the admonition to strap on the belt of truth, frankly, it makes me think of nothing so much as Wonder Woman and her lasso of truth. Advice about shoes? At this point, I don’t know about you, but I mostly go for comfortable these days. You begin to catch my drift? I have hard time personally connecting with the notion of armor.

So, I think of football. What are shoulder pads but a breastplate? What is a helmet but, well, a helmet. And doesn’t it make a difference whether you put on cleats or turf shoes? Even these metaphors may seem irrelevant for some of us here, today. Unlike myself or Hank Williams, Jr. Some of us may not be “ready for some football.” Nonetheless, I am going to ask you to hang with me.

For while it may seem as though the author of Ephesians serves as not much more than the team manager running down a checklist before his players hit the field, he is much more than that. He is, in fact, the coach. And he is equipping his audience with much more than protection. He is equipping them with fight.

Think of all those sports movies you’ve ever seen. When our underdog heroes are down at half time here is what you *don’t* hear:

“Well boys, their killing us out there, so I want you to go out and wear a helmet, shoulder pads and good shoes. Break!” That’s right up there with my telling my kids to carry

an umbrella and look both ways before crossing the street. Not exactly the stuff of legend. Unless you count the most legendarily lame motivational speech in sports history.

Contrast that with Coach Dan Devine's speech to the Fighting Irish at the climax of the classic film *Rudy*:

*You all know what you have to do. Remember, no one, and I mean no one, comes into our house and pushes us around. This is your game now, gentlemen. And for you seniors, it's your last one so make it count, because you will remember it for the rest of your lives. [Pause] Let's get 'em!*¹

Is that about a house? Is it about a shoving match? Is it about whose game it is or which game it is? No, obviously it's about much more than that.

To circle back to the whole armor analogy, it's not about *what* they wear onto the field, it's about how they *wear* it. It's about *who they are* when they wear it and *why* they wear it. Put another way, its not about just suiting up, it's about showing up. It's about taking a stand.

So, hear again, how the writer of Ephesians clothes his Christians. But let's strip away the literal armor and listen to what actually strengthens and protects them: Truth. Righteousness. The gospel of peace. Faith. Salvation. The Spirit and the Word. That sounds a whole lot more substantial than a secure chinstrap.

As well it should. For as the writer points out "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." What does that even mean?

I think Walter Wink gets it right in his classic series *Naming the Powers*. When he describes these powers, he does not portray them like some fairytale phantasm Rather he depicts them as the very real ideas and energies at work in our institutions and souls that demean, dehumanize and destroy us every day.

He catalogues the pervasive lies poisoning our atmosphere like "things matter more than people. Or some people matter less than others. Or that the acceptable cost of my prosperity is your poverty for many. Or that the reasonable price to pay for my joy is your despair. Or that our planet is disposable. Or that hatred will bring unity and belligerence will bring peace."

Dispersed by a 24-hour news cycle and a social media barrage these ideas contain no more actual substance than a stream of electrons floating through space. Yet we all know that at some point they collide with our hearts, minds and souls and land with the violent force of a blow to the body.

When suddenly become real in the mutually destructive words and deeds of selfishness, bigotry, apathy and exploitation, they defy the loving commandment of the Lord of Life and most assuredly they aim for our destruction. I don't know about you, but for me, against that, I've got to stand.

All of a sudden, our loins feel like they may need more than just a little girding. Faced by the potential of obliteration all around us what are we to do? Like the audience of the letter to the Ephesians, we are to *stand*.

Stand, stand, stand, stand. The writer uses that word *four times* in verses 11 – 14. That is the same stand, by the way, used in the Book of Revelations when John of Patmos exclaims:

¹ *Rudy*. Dir. David Anspaugh. TriStar Pictures, 1993. Film.

When [the Lamb] opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?'

(Revelation 6.12-17, NRSV)

I read that and I think, by heavens we better be protected, and we better gather our strength. And we'd better stand firm, because there's only so many chances to stand we are going to get.

Suddenly, the need for "armoring" seems apt. For salvation is undoubtedly a contact sport. For Paul, for instance, standing up for his belief landed him in jail. And eventually, like Jesus, it got him killed. The struggle ends not with a set of crossbars, but with the cross.

Remember, in the voice of the writer of Ephesians, Paul concludes: "Pray 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 for which I am an ambassador [the Greek here, by the way is *presbeuo*—*pres-byoo* '-o: --Let that sink in for a minute] a *presbeuo* in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly as I *must* speak."

All of which may incline us more to run than to stand, so I want to try to frame it in a way that still enables you to get on your feet and out the door.

The rock band R.E.M. in their hit song "Stand" gives this advice:

*Stand in the place where you live, Now face North, Think about direction,
Wonder why you haven't before.²*

I've painted a pretty dramatic picture of standing, but I think scaling it back to this level is no less valid and may be more equipping.

To me, the lyric suggests that standing begins with stopping. And looking. And noticing. And wondering. And coming to awareness that you have a location. And then making decisions based on that awareness—about where the world stands and where you choose to stand in relation to it. Stand still. *Then* stand firm.

To clarify matters, I like the coaching that Professor of Pastoral Counseling Archie Smith, Jr. gives. He makes a distinction between standing firm and just good-old garden variety stubbornness. A distinction, by the way, that I sometimes lose track of.

He says:

Stubbornness is not self-or-other discerning. It is not informed and it does not grow. It is enshrined in a closed circle of certainty and becomes

² REM. "Stand." *Green*, Warner Brothers, 1989.

fearful, boisterous and one-dimensional. The stubborn heart and mind are impervious to reason and may constitute one way to hide insecurity.³

Standing firm, he goes on to say, is different:

Standing firm means that one is willing to debate, listen and consider alternatives in order to reach a beneficial goal, while at the same time not sacrificing basic principles. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood firm on non-violence. Margaret Sanger, the twentieth-century suffragette, stood firm on women's rights. Nelson Mandela stood firm against apartheid. This list goes on...

He concludes:

The lesson we draw from them is that to have a strong ego (I might recast that "to know where we stand), a concern for justice and compassion is to be grounded in the convictions of community and open to critical evaluation.⁴

Finally, to send you out onto the field I echo this challenge issued by the religious historian Haruko Nawata Ward. She asks: "Where do you see the spiritual darkness operating against God's power of love in today's world? In our own minds, or in the embodied "others?" can Christians be extremists of love, peace and boldness in bringing peace in these present evil days?"⁵

I pray, that fortified by God's spirit and word, we leave from this place today and everyday equipped to stand. Amen.

³ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. "Proper 16 (Sunday Between August 21 and August 27 inclusive) in *Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 376

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Feasting*, 378