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Pentecost 15 B – September 5, 2021

“Being A Christian ‘Survivor’”

Read: Ephesians 6: 10 - 20 /Memorize: Eph. 6: 11

How many of you are fans of Survivor? Put your hands up. I’m not, so you can help me out, if I need it. It may have to do with my being a selective eater. I’m not into larvae or grubs. I’m also not into knocking people off things. Basically, it’s not my game. My lack of participation has not seemed to impact the show’s popularity.

The game is based on three phrases: outplay, outlast, and outwit. Most of the time, winning involves deception. At the end of each episode, someone is voted off the island by the “tribal council.” The host informs the loser that the “tribe has spoken.”

With that as background, think again on that text from Ephesians. Paul says we are in a battle to survive. We are in mortal combat “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of the dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil...” I suspect that you have seen and felt such conflict.

Our opponents are not a Rich or a Rudy or a Sue or a Kelly, people who may at times be a pain to us. You and I are up against the systemic evil that pervades our lives. You know from where and who, that comes, the devil. You might remember a number of years ago when Family Promise made a presentation to us. They said they had surveyed the county and found there were over four hundred children who were homeless. Imagine being a child in that situation? Is that the result of evil? Of course it is.

The problem is not people. The problem is evil. It leads us to selfishness. We only care about ourselves. We may blame the problem on the actions of people, but it’s really the impact of evil in this world.

There are all sorts of rationalizations that might be offered but the problem comes back to evil and its impact on all. Whether we are the ones experiencing the difficulty or see others experiencing it. Paul understood that we have to face it, because we live in this world, so he wanted us to know the resources available to us.

He uses the equipment of a Roman Legionnaire, something very familiar to his readers, to explain how we can survive in this conflict. To his readers, that soldier was a first century, quintessential survivor. He uses the way he was outfitted as a metaphor for our Christian survival equipment. This passage is commonly called the Armor of God.

He begins by talking about the “belt of truth.” We know that the contestants on Survivor are often deceptive. In the game, it’s quite fine to use deception to win. If deliberate deception were limited to reality games, we might pass it off, but we know better. Deception occurs on all sorts of levels. Some of it is personal; others more organized.

Billions upon billions of dollars are lost to scammers each year. Roxann was among those they tried to hit up this past week, by sending her an email, purportedly from me, asking her to do me a favor. They use deception to convince people, any of us, to part with our money. Is it evil? You bet it is. Truth is essential for people to survive. Where do we find truth? In Jesus, who is the truth. Let us cling to him in all times, so evil will not win out.

Next, Paul talks about the breastplate of righteousness. Biblical righteousness does not mean blamelessness. It refers to the character of a relationship. Paul knows that we will never be able to withstand evil without the protection of a relationship with Jesus. We find our hope and protection in Him. Paul speaks of our need to “put on Christ” to gain that protection.

There are the shoes of the gospel of peace. It’s almost paradoxical, presenting a warrior equipped with peace. Paul knows that to establish the peace of God, which is God’s ultimate aim, we must do battle against the spiritual evil which disturbs that peace. Perhaps, he’s reminding us that we can’t bring peace to others if we are sitting on our duffs. Peace takes the commitment of people to go to help others.

Then, we move on to the shield of faith. We might actually want to translate that as the shield of faithfulness because it’s God’s armor. God doesn’t need faith. He has faithfulness.

We see that illustrated in the wonderful Old Testament book of Hosea. God commands Hosea to take a prostitute named Gomer as his wife. Gomer keeps going

back to her old trade. God keeps telling Hosea to not give up but be faithful to her. That's exactly what Hosea does.

This book is really a parable. It's a reminder that even when we are unfaithful, God remains faithful. God's shield of faithfulness reminds us He will always be faithful. God will always stand with us and will never let us down.

Now, we find Paul talking about the helmet of salvation. Salvation does not just mean that pie in the sky in the by and by. The word Salvation itself means to be healed. It's about health and wholeness. Salvation is a description for the way God meant life to be.

The reason Paul called salvation a helmet is because the helmet offers protection for the head. Too often we Christians either act or fail to act because we think we know what God wants. Sometimes we even misidentify the enemy as people. That is always a disaster. It's the evil of the world and we know who brings that. Satan.

Some have said of the church it is the only organization in the history of the world that it shoots its wounded. We say or do things that are destructive of each other. In the military they have a name for it: friendly fire. It is when a service member is killed by another member. We need God's protection for our heads, and the rest of us, so that we think before we say or do things, if we are to ultimately survive.

The final piece of equipment is the sword of the spirit which is identified as the Word of God. Some have offered that this is the only piece of offensive equipment that one has. Unfortunately, some folks have been most offensive in their use of God's Word. They use it to cut off other Christians because they don't agree about something. Many churches experience this and it is one of the things we want to guard against. Jesus came to die for all. He loves us all and wants all to be saved.

Perhaps we might better understand that sword of the Spirit if we look at Hebrews 4: 12 which says, "For the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." That makes it sound more like a surgical equipment, where the scalpel of the Spirit can exorcize out that which is evil.

So how do we use this equipment? Paul has this word of advice for us: pray! Pray at all times and in all places. Pray for one another. Look around you today and take note of those who are nearby you. When you go to bed tonight pray for them. You

may not know their needs and conditions, but you can lift them up in prayer. If you don't know them, introduce yourself. There's nothing to be embarrassed at. A lot of us forget names. They often have the same fear.

There are three more groups to pray for: those who have not returned to worship. Some, who are not present may not return. Our prayers and invitation can help change that. Others may be with us online, but because we don't see them, we may not think about them. Pray for them. Finally, pray for those who don't know Jesus. Pray that through our ministry of "Sharing Christ, Changing Lives!" they may come to know Him and rejoice in Him.

In asking us to pray for each other Paul is reminding us that we are not lone survivors. We are members of a tribe. As in all tribes, the families have different last names but all are a part of that vast company of saints known as the Church of Jesus Christ through all the ages. We are joined together in Jesus Christ.

Be a "Christian Survivor." There is a contest going on. It's not against Richard or Kelly or Ricky and Sue but as Paul says "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil..." Evil is working against everything that God wants for our lives.

Our "tribe has spoken." We're not voting anybody off the island. We're gathering them together in the Name of Jesus and the power of the Spirit. We do that because God gave us a command to do so. We overcome evil through faith in Jesus, who joined the tribe so that we could live with Him forever.