

Ephesians 6:10-20
"Be Strong in the Lord"
15th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17B)

September 1, 2024
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might" (Ephesians 6:10).

My dear Wormwood,

Our policy, for the moment, is to conceal ourselves. Of course this has not always been so. We are really faced with a cruel dilemma. When the humans disbelieve in our existence we lose all the pleasing results of direct terrorism and we make no magicians. On the other hand, when they believe in us, we cannot make them materialists and skeptics. At least, not yet. I have great hopes that we shall learn in due time how to emotionalise and mythologise their science to such an extent that it is, in effect, a belief in us. ...

I do not think you will have much difficulty in keeping the patient in the dark. The fact that 'devils' are predominantly *comic* figures in the modern imagination will help you. If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that (it is an old textbook method of confusing them) he therefore cannot believe in you.

Your affectionate uncle
Screwtape¹

That letter was from Satan's undersecretary to Wormwood, his incompetent demon nephew in C.S. Lewis' "The Screwtape Letters." Throughout each letter, Wormwood provides guidance and direction to his nephew with the goal of leading his patient to hell. Each letter shows how we are caught in the middle of spiritual warfare between God and Satan. The point of C.S. Lewis' book is to make us aware of the scheming of the devil in our daily life. But how many people are actually aware of Satan's spiritual warfare against humanity?

So many people, even many Christians, aren't aware of Satan's spiritual warfare, or they don't even believe we are at war at all. Many don't believe that there is a devil. And that may be his most deceitful scheme. You see, when someone doesn't believe in Satan, or when we forget about him, we forget that we are at war.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Harper One, 1996), 31, 32.

When we do that, we get soft and flabby. We become more vulnerable to sin than we were already. We begin to rationalize our favorite sins, whatever they may be – ***“evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness”*** (Mark 7:21-22). When we forget about this spiritual war, we can rationalize almost anything, because we think we’re hearing words of wisdom rather than whispers of the enemy.

But we all notice struggles, even if we don’t notice Satan. We do notice when our paychecks don’t go as far as they used to. We notice the conflicts among family and friends. Life is a struggle for each and every one of us. Hardship and heartache are part of the daily struggle that we all face in this fallen world. We are inclined to think that our problems only come from people. But that’s not the case. Yes, Satan uses them, but they are only his instruments. People are just pawns in Satan’s war.

We face an even greater struggle that isn’t against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil at work. As much as we may try to ignore it, there is, in fact, a great cosmic struggle between good and evil, between God and Satan, and we are right in the middle of it. St. Paul describes the struggle that Christians face with such evil as a wrestling match, akin to professional wrestling. But there’s a problem, the referee has been knocked out, so the match is now “anything goes.” The tables, ladders, chairs, kendo sticks, flaming darts, and low-blows are now in play. And this wrestling match is no longer inside the squared circle; it takes place 24/7 – every single day of your life. And your opponent, Satan, will do anything to take you down.

Day by day, we are battling forces that are so far beyond our ability to withstand, and we must take it seriously for these forces that we battle against are far worse than what we can see. And he does not sleep or rest for even one moment as he attempts with all trickery to hinder your faith so that he may catch you and put you under his control. Assisting Satan is the fallen world and your own flesh, which you carry around your neck and which always drags your back, so that you may become secure and careless and cease watching and contending.

We cannot begin to list and imagine what Satan’s cunning attacks will be, except for what we have personally experienced. He is the supreme master of a thousand arts, with various ideas and suggestions, which he substitutes God’s Word for his lies. You may not even notice his attacks as he knows how to deceive our minds through the propaganda of mass media. And unlike what you may see in television and movies, Satan will not appear to you as he truly looks, in all his hideous attire, saying: *“I am Satan. Be on guard against me!”*

Rather, Satan crawls around like a serpent, adorns himself most beautifully disguised as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14), a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8), the father of lies (John 8:44). He twists God's Word to fit his needs as he attacks our faith, Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, and all the articles of the Creed, which none were given or instituted by flesh and blood or are part of this earthly governance, but which come from heaven and pertain to eternal life. So, how can we possibly stand against Satan and his spiritual forces of evil?

The only way we can stand against Satan is by knowing that we don't have the strength within us to fight him. Left to ourselves, we are doomed. We cannot stand against Satan. Left to ourselves, we are easy prey for the devil's snares of lies and lust. In our weakness, we easily stumble into his traps of selfishness and greed. Left to ourselves, we are not equipped to battle against the evil schemes of the devil: his deceit (John 8:44), his manipulative words (1 Cor. 2:4), and his flattery (1 Thess. 2:5) as he disguises his evil intent. Satan whispers in our ears manipulative words like "tolerance" and "women's reproductive health," which mean just the opposite.

So, what can we do? Nothing. We can do nothing. But there is Someone who can do something. This Someone is Jesus Christ. Only Jesus gives us strength so that we are able to stand against the devil. So, our strength to stand against Satan is not in our knowledge or effort, but only in Christ alone.

In our text, St. Paul acts like a good, true field captain who addresses his people as they are arranged in battle formation as he admonishes them to stand firm and defend themselves boldly and confidently. St. Paul points out that those who have been Baptized into Christ and cling to Him always are also soldiers, soldiers who are equipped with Christ's weapons and armor.

As much as we may not like to hear this, our Christian life is not a life of leisure, nor a life of peace and security as we live in this fallen world. As long as you are in Christ, the spiritual forces of evil attack us without ceasing from all sides. So, we must not snore or become lazy and slothful, but always watch and remain equipped.

So, it is not enough to have the knowledge about Jesus. For even the demons believe in Him. But we must cling to Jesus as He comes to us in His Word and Sacraments, so that the devil does not tempt us into moral lapses by yielding on points of Christian doctrine or by reducing Christianity into an external thing, a mere shell. So, we need to be strong against the temptations of the evil one. But we cannot be strong by ourselves. We need help – God's help.

It is only the strength that comes from Christ Jesus alone that enables you to stand against Satan. In Christ alone, we are able to stand against the devil and his schemes. For we have put on the new man, Jesus Christ, in the waters of Holy Baptism. St. Paul, our field captain, calls on us to put on the full armor of God. Picture this armor in your minds.

- **The belt of truth.** Every soldier in every age needs to be convinced that the cause for which he's fighting is true. Our cause is true. We stand against Satan and against the fallen world because God has opened our eyes to see Him as He truly is. Because Satan has blinded the world, it may ridicule us, abuse us, and call us foolish. But our cause will be vindicated.
- **The breastplate of righteousness.** We know that our righteousness will never stand against Satan, but God has firmly fastened onto us the righteousness of Christ. By laying down His armor to die and rise from the grave for us, Jesus gives us absolute protection against Satan's accusations. We have the assurance of forgiveness as we wear Christ's own holiness.
- **The shoes of peace.** Now that our sins are forgiven by Jesus' death, we are at peace with God.
- **The shield of faith.** Faith alone in Jesus saves.
- **The helmet of salvation.** Salvation has been won for us through Jesus Christ!
- **The sword of the spirit.** This is the Word of God. Unlike the other armor, the sword is offensive. When fighting at close quarters, God's Holy Word is the best piece of all for warding off Satan's thrusts, and to change hearts and minds.

Now, this armor is not seen but is spiritual. This is God's armor that we are all given in Holy Baptism. Clothed in Christ and His strength, we are able to stand against the spiritual forces of evil. Strengthened by the Holy Spirit at work through the Word, we can be strong in the Lord. We may be afraid, be full of doubt and uncertainty in this "anything goes" wrestling match, but we are wearing Christ's armor that He continuously strengthens through His Means of Grace, so that we remain upright against the devil and his demons as we are not misled by his lies. We stand because the One who is in you, Christ Jesus the crucified and risen Lord, is greater than the prince of this fallen world.

Yes, we are in this wresting match of cosmic proportions, but that shouldn't dismay us, for our help is cosmic also. ***"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places"*** (Ephesians 1:3) When you are weak, He makes you strong. So, be strong in the Lord as He has placed upon you His armor! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen. + SOLI DEO GLORIA +