

1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43

1 Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion.

⁶ Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim.

¹⁰ And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, ¹¹ so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.

²² Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. ²³ He said, “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, ²⁴ the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. ²⁵ Therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, ‘There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.’ ²⁶ Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David.

²⁷ “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! ²⁸ Regard your servant’s prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; ²⁹ that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. ³⁰ Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive. ⁴¹ “Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name ⁴²—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, ⁴³ then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have

built.

Psalm 84 (UMH 804)

Ephesians 6:10-20

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For 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. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹Pray 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 ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

John 6:56-69

⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

⁶⁰When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” ⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵And he

said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." ⁶⁶Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha

HYMN STORY: A Mighty Fortress is Our God

This morning's first hymn, **A Mighty Fortress is Our God**, was written by Martin Luther. Martin Luther was not a stranger to conflict. An Augustinian monk, his understanding of the Christian faith was radically changed and reshaped by his reading about faith and grace in the book of Romans -- setting the stage for his opposition when the Pope authorized the sale of indulgences to fund the building of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Luther's ninety-five theses and his arrest and trial at Worms followed.

Scholars think that this hymn was written at Coburg, Germany and was inspired by the Diet of Spire (1529), which sought to suppress the Lutheran movement. The Holy Roman Emperor, Charles the Fifth, supported that effort, but was opposed by a number of German princes who supported Luther. This hymn became Luther's battle-cry in that conflict. Its theme comes from Psalm 46, which says:

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
 though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
 though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble with its tumult" (Psalm 46:1-3)

Luther wrote thirty-seven hymns altogether, and his followers wrote tens of thousands. This hymn is by far the most familiar of Luther's hymns. It is found in nearly every Christian hymnal, including three Catholic hymnals.

God's Armor

A college class was told that they had to write a short story in as few words as

possible. The short story had to contain the following three themes 1. Religion, 2. Sexuality, and 3. Mystery. Only one of the resulting stories got graded A+. The story goes: *“Good God, I’m pregnant. I wonder who did it?”*

My sermon won’t be quite that short, however.

Those of you who patiently sit through my monthly sermons probably know that I generally speak from the Lectionary, and generally from the week’s gospel passage. There are a couple of reasons for doing that. First, because the Gospel reading is usually about things that Jesus said and did - and Jesus should be, in my opinion, our primary source of information and inspiration about all things Christian. And second, because there is a large source of lectionary-based sermon-writing information out on the Internet, and most of it is about the Gospel readings. But today’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians sparked my interest, and led me off the familiar trodden path of Gospel sermons.

Over the last 15 years or so, since I have come back to church, I have several times heard the phrase “God’s Armor”, or “putting on the armor of God”, but I never really knew where the term came from. It always sounded vaguely militaristic and violent to me, and the phrase was usually spoken by someone from one of those fundamentalist evangelical churches like you see on cable TV. As I thought about it more, I realized that I couldn’t recall - ever - hearing that phrase used in a United Methodist church, by a Methodist minister, or in any Methodist produced or inspired writings. Which is probably why I didn’t know much about it. God’s armor is apparently something that United Methodists are uncomfortable or uninterested in talking about.

I’m not sure why. If you listen to what Paul writes, it isn’t violent or militaristic. Paul is using armor as a metaphor - something that Paul does frequently in his writings. When Paul compares the members of the church to the parts of a body in his First Letter to the Corinthians, and tells how each part of the church needs the other parts - just like each part of the body needs the other parts, it makes perfect sense to us. And nobody thinks that much about it. But when Paul compares truth to a belt, or righteousness to a breastplate, some people seem to get uncomfortable.

Listen again to the passage from Ephesians: ¹⁰*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.* ¹¹*Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be*

able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For 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. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

The Message Bible is always a good resource to read when you want to render the Scriptures into the everyday language of today. Listen to how the Message puts this passage: *“God is strong and wants you to be strong. So take everything that the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no afternoon athletic contest that we’ll walk away from and forget about is a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.*

Be prepared. You’re up against more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon that God has issued, so that when it’s all over but the shouting you’ll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You’ll need them throughout your life. God’s word is an indispensable weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other’s spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out. And don’t forget to pray for me. Pray that I’ll know what to say and have the courage to say it at the right time, telling the mystery to one and all, the message that I, jailbird preacher that I am, am responsible for getting out.”

Maybe it isn’t the armor that bothers people about this passage - maybe it’s what, or better yet who, Paul wants you to put on the armor to battle against. Paul wants you to put on the armor to battle the devil. That is much more evident in the version that I read you from The Message Bible.

The devil is a concept of Christianity that has been de-emphasized. The idea of a creature with red, scaly skin, a pitchfork, and a bifurcated tail is . . . well . . . so 16th century. These days, people much prefer to blame evil on “society”, or something like that. Less of a “who” than a “what”.

I am not going to stand up here and defend the traditional idea of the Devil, Satan, or Lucifer as creatures that buy people souls, or trick people into doing evil deeds, because that doesn't fit my 21st century mind very well either. But I *do* believe that there is a force of evil, of some sort or another, that inhabits our world and opposes the good things that Jesus teaches us. You only have to watch the TV news for so long to get the idea that the problems that plague mankind are caused by more than fast-food commercials during children's programming, or overcrowded classrooms.

When Carol and I were at the Rocky Mountain Conference in Denver last June, one day we were sitting toward the back with a group of attendees from other Utah Methodist churches. The Conference was held in a large ballroom in the Marriott hotel at the Tech Center, and at any given time there were about a thousand, or maybe more people attending the session. And as is typical at gatherings like that, people that know each other tend to congregate and sit next to each other. So anyway, Carol and I are sitting with a group of people we know from the churches around the state. In the next row ahead of us was a fellow who was a lay delegate from Hilltop UMC. And we both noticed that he was reading a book called **Why Men Hate Going to Church**, by the author David Murrow.

A few weeks later was I reading book reviews on the internet, and sure enough, the book review was of the book **Why Men Hate Going to Church**, by the author David Murrow. The coincidence, and my curiosity - was enough to get me to look for further information about the book. That led me to a website called Church for Men.com Let me quote from a page on the website:

Where are all the men? You're not just imagining it: Christianity is short on men. Here are the facts:

- *The typical U.S. Congregation draws an adult crowd that's 61% female, 39% male. This gender gap shows up in all age categories.*

- *On any given Sunday there are 13 million more adult women than men in America's churches.*
- *This Sunday almost 25 percent of married, churchgoing women will worship without their husbands.*
- *Midweek activities often draw 70 to 80 percent female participants.*
- *The majority of church employees are women (except for ordained clergy, who are overwhelmingly male).*
- *As many as 90 percent of the boys who are being raised in church will abandon it by their 20th birthday. (I was one of those.) Many of these boys will never return.*
- *More than 90 percent of American men believe in God, and five out of six call themselves Christians. But only two out of six attend church on a given Sunday. The average man accepts the reality of Jesus Christ, but fails to see any value in going to church.*

It's not just a lack of presence; most of the men who do attend our worship services just aren't "getting it." Every week the gospel bounces off their souls like bullets off Superman's chest. Here are the facts:

- *A significant number of churchgoing men attend out of habit, unaffected by what they hear.*
- *Quite a few men go to church simply to keep their wives or mothers or girlfriends happy.*
- *The majority of men who attend church do nothing during the week to grow their faith.*
- *Relatively few churches are able to establish or maintain a vibrant men's ministry.*

This gender gap is not just a U.S. phenomenon; churches around the world are short on men. No other major religion suffers such a large, chronic shortage of males. In the Islamic world men are publicly and unashamedly religious—often more so than women. Of the world's great religions, only Christianity has a consistent, nagging shortage of male practitioners.

Jesus had no trouble captivating men. Fishermen dropped nets full of fish to follow Him, but today's church can't convince men to drop their TV remote controls for a couple of hours a week. The big questions:

- *What is it about modern Christianity that is driving men away?*
- *Jesus was a magnet to men, but our churches repel them. What's changed?*
- *Why do rival faiths inspire male allegiance, while ours breeds male indifference?*
- *What can we do about it?*

It's the last question, *What can we do about it?*, that the web site and the book are meant to address. I haven't bought the book or read it, but I think I might. Even if the book doesn't have the answer, it might have some good ideas. And the subject is an interesting one, one that I have wondered about many times over my years in the Christian church.

I have always taken for granted that there are more women at church than men. It has always seemed to me that it was "just the way it is", like the sun coming up in the east, or summer following spring. When I was a teenage boy in junior high and high school growing up in Wyoming, the fact that 75% of the kids at church summer camp were girls was pretty appealing to me. After all, the odds were in my favor, and I needed all the help I could get.

But as an adult, it has become less and less appealing. When Reverend Moa was the pastor here, he used to say something along the lines of "*Always the sisters in Christ, but never the brothers in Christ*" when he would look out over the mostly female congregation. If the book **Why Men Hate Going to Church** is right, St. Paul wasn't the only place with more sisters than brothers. Anyway, if I do read the book, I'll talk more about it, especially if the author has some good ideas.

I'm also wondering if our squeamishness with the concept of the "Armor of God" in today's Scripture reading, and the lack of men in church, may be related in some way. I don't know, but I hope that some day I will have a better idea.

Oh and by the way, in honor of our sermon subject today, I have chosen some more "macho" hymns. I hope you like them.

Thank you, and Amen.