

3.24.24 Palm Sunday Be Strong in the Lord Mark 11.1-11, Ephesians 6.10-20

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Holy Week begins today with Palm Sunday when Jesus enters Jerusalem. It was a day filled with explosive potential. Here was a teacher who was drawing thousands to hear him and hundreds to follow him. A man who had worked miracles, even raising the dead. Some people were hoping he'd lead the nation to independence from Rome and restore the kingdom to Israel. Now he was coming to the place of the Temple and the heart of the Jewish faith. If Jesus were going to lead anything, declare himself to be anything, be crowned anything, surely some people thought it would be here.

Some of those closest to Jesus shared this expectation. He'd been telling them that everything he was doing and teaching was moving toward Jerusalem. Yet entering on a colt, in fulfillment of the prophet Zechariah's declaration about the coming Messiah (Zechariah 9:9), made the impact of the day clear. If Jesus had wanted to be a king of conquest, of war, of establishing a political kingdom on earth, he wouldn't have entered Jerusalem on a donkey. He would have ridden in on a war-horse. But he purposefully did not. The donkey was a lowly animal of peace not of conquest.

People laid down blankets and branches in front of Him, which is why we call the day Jesus entered Jerusalem Palm Sunday. Palm branches represented Jewish nationalism, Jewish pride, Jewish victory. The people on the roadside announced Jesus' arrival with "Hosanna!"—a Hebrew expression that meant "Save us!" or "Save now!" This was followed by shouts about the restoration of the kingdom of David. But they didn't pay attention to what Jesus was riding. It isn't easy defying people's expectations and desires and being faithful to God. Jesus was able to ride into Jerusalem the way he did because he did what Ephesians 6 tells the church to do. He had on **the whole armor of God**. Some of you are familiar with the passage I'm about to read, however, I encourage you to think of Jesus riding into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week as you hear these words in **Ephesians 6:10-20**.

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. **12** For 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**. 13 Therefore **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**. 14 Stand therefore, and fasten **the belt of truth** around your waist, and put on the **breastplate of righteousness**. 15 As **shoes** for your feet put on **whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace**. 16 With all of these, take **the shield of faith**, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take **the helmet of salvation**, and **the sword of the Spirit**, which is the word of God. 18

Pray 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**. 19

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**, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. **Pray** that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.”

Hearing this passage and thinking of Jesus during Holy Week impacts how we hear it, doesn't it? Jesus needed to have on the whole armor of God to endure what he had to face that week. The Letter to the Ephesians concludes with how the church is to respond to the evil influences and forces in the world as Jesus did in his life. The instruction here is important if you're to live a victorious life. If you lose the spiritual battle, then you, your family, the church, and society will suffer. And make no mistake, there is a battle going on between good and evil.

On November 14, 1960, at the age of six, Ruby Bridges became the first African American child to attend the all-white public William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana. Ruby and her mother were escorted by federal marshals to the school. We can't imagine the fear and stress she faced at such a young age. In a recent speech, the now 69-year-old Ruby Bridges said there is an ongoing war between good and evil and that evil takes a keen interest in each of us—and so does good. Bridges said both good and evil, are seeking someone to use, someone to work through, as conduits and vessels. Evil doesn't care about race or creed. It desires anyone who is willing to say yes. The evil that we see on a regular basis in our world, whether war, terrorist attacks, mass shootings, domestic violence, hate crimes, racism, human trafficking are orchestrated acts of evil by people, organizations, institutions, and

systems who've given evil permission to use them. Ephesians 6:12 reminds us that we battle not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Ephesians tells us in the struggle between good and evil the church is to **“be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power,”** to put on **the whole armor** of God and **to pray**. Two times, in **Ephesians 6:11 & 13** the church is told to, **“Put on the whole armor of God,”** so that we'll be able **to stand firm**. Ephesians uses the imagery of a Roman soldier's equipment to show how the pieces of Christianity work together as we strive to serve God.

It's important for us to hear these words about the whole armor of God and the spiritual battle we're in as being written to all the Ephesians, to all of us, to the church. Paul never would have imagined anyone trying to fight a spiritual battle or to be a follower of Christ on his or her own, any more than any Roman soldier would have tried to fight on his own. Everyone living under the power of Rome knew how Roman soldiers fought on the battlefield. The basic unit of the Roman army was the century, which comprised eighty men. The officers, or leaders, of each century were called centurions. Six centuries of eighty men formed a cohort (480), and ten cohorts made up a legion (4,800 men). The Roman government knew the importance of the army and provided them with good armor and weapons. The Roman soldier's three principal weapons were the javelin or spear (pilum), the shield (scutum), and short sword (gladius). The soldiers would throw their javelins first as they approached the enemy. The tortoise (testudo) formation was a type of shield wall formation commonly used by attacking Roman Legions to defend themselves against arrows and flaming arrows during battles, particularly sieges. You may have seen it portrayed in movies such as *Spartacus* or *Gladiator*. Someone standing off on his own would have been an easy target and easily struck down. The Romans knew there was power and safety in unity.

What I just shared would have been common knowledge to anyone living in the Roman empire in the first century when Ephesians was written. Ephesians uses this imagery from the Roman Legions for the church and Christians. Christians have as much chance of surviving and thriving on their own in the battle of light and darkness

and good and evil, as a lone soldier isolated from the protection of his unit. In the church there is power and safety in unity.

There are seven pieces of armor in Ephesians 6, the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes that prepare us to proclaim the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit which is the word of God.

I'd never connected Ephesians 6 with Palm Sunday before, yet Jesus entered Jerusalem wearing the whole armor of God. He came with **the truth and was the truth**, he never lied or was dishonest. He came with righteousness. Righteousness is the quality of being right in the eyes of God, including our character, attitude, and our actions. Jesus came proclaiming the gospel of peace, the good news of the kingdom of heaven to which all are invited. Jesus carried his faith everywhere like a shield, offering salvation, and speaking the word of God.

No Roman soldier going into a battle would ever have neglected to use every piece of armor available. No soldier would say, *"I don't think I'll bother carrying a shield today, it's so heavy. I'm not going to wear a helmet, it's uncomfortable and ruins my hair. I think I'll pass on wearing a breastplate to protect my vital organs because it makes me sweat."* You get the point. If you were going into battle, you'd want to have all the armor and protection possible. Your comrades would also immediately remind you of what to do if you forgot or failed to fully arm yourself.

As Christians, if we realize we're in a spiritual battle in which there are real casualties, we should do the same thing. It would be foolish and dangerous not to arm an equip ourselves every day with truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God. We wouldn't be good spiritual comrades if we didn't remind our brothers and sisters in Christ to do the same.

After speaking about the whole armor of God, in Ephesians 6:18, 19, & 20 **there's a threefold repetition of the need to pray**. The church is told to **pray in the Spirit** at all times, keeping alert and **always persevering** in supplication **for all the saints.. Pray** that those who speak will be given a compelling message about mystery of the Gospel that in Christ the dividing wall of hostility had been broken down between Jews and non-Jews. **Pray** that God's people would declare the good news of the kingdom of heaven boldly.

Prayer is like the spiritual power that infuses an army that's fully armored and ready for battle. Without it, we can be lacking in boldness and courage. The movie *Hacksaw Ridge* is based on the true story of Desmond Doss, a conscientious objector in WW II who choose to serve as a medic and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his bravery in saving the lives of 75 soldiers including his captain, Jack Glover, during twelve grueling hours at Hacksaw Ridge on the island of Okinawa in the Pacific. After being shamed and ridiculed by his fellow troops for his religious beliefs and his objection to violence, Doss was praised by those same men. In the final scene in the movie, the men won't ascend the ridge to renew the attack until Doss has prayed because they have so much belief in his belief in God. As we've heard in our journey through Ephesians, it includes two significant prayers in chapters one and three and it ends by urging the church to pray. That's what we're going to do and focus on as a church in the weeks following Easter.

Two weeks from today, we're going to begin a new six-week worship series *Teach Us to Pray*, a six-week exploration of *The Lord's Prayer*. Those of you who have been at BBC ten years or more may recall that we did a study of the Lord's Prayer a decade ago, but I think it's worth returning to every ten years or so! We'll be inviting folks to be in a small group who aren't yet in a group. If you watch online, we want to see if there is anyone online interested in facilitating or being in an online group. We can always use more people willing to host or facilitate a group in their home or here at church. We'll provide all the materials you need.

We've journeyed through Ephesians for eight weeks and I want to close by mentioning the last time Ephesus is mentioned in the Bible. In chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation there are seven letters to seven churches and the first letter is to the church in Ephesus. Each of the seven churches is commended for what they're doing well and coached how they need to improve. John says these are the words of the risen and glorified Christ. "To the angel **of the church in Ephesus** write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands:

2 "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have

found them to be false. 3 I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. **4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.** 5 Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. 6 Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. **To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God."**

Ephesians 1:15 declares, *"I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints."* Yet just 30-40 years later that tangible love apparently had faded. **Ephesians 1:16-17** mentions praying for the Ephesians twice. I wonder if by the time Revelation was written folks had stopped praying and their love had grown cold. We don't want that to happen to us or our church.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem wearing the whole armor of God. He would ask his disciples and his innermost circle to pray for him on Thursday night at his moment of greatest strain, stress, and conflict with evil in the Garden of Gethsemane. Sadly, they failed him. They couldn't even stay awake one hour to pray with him in his time of greatest need. They had not yet grasped or put on the whole armor of God. They were not prepared to stand firm.

We learn from Jesus, the apostles, and the church in Ephesus, the importance of being united and strong in the Lord, wearing the whole armor of God each day, and faithfully praying in the Spirit for each other, the church, and for God's kingdom of love, light, and goodness to fully come and be manifest in our lives and in our world. I pray Jesus' example will inspire us all to do our part.

Benediction: Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on and keep on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes that prepare you to proclaim the gospel of peace, take up the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit which is the word of God. And finally, **Ephesians 6:23-24,**
Peace be to the whole community,
and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How would you describe the emotions of the people welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday? What do you think Jesus was feeling and thinking?
2. Why is being “strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power” important for Jesus, for us as disciples, and for the church as a whole?
3. Why is it important to put on the whole armor of God and not just some of it? What would happen to a soldier who only put on some of his or her armor?
4. What are the seven pieces of armor mentioned in Ephesians 6:10-17? What does each piece of armor contribute or provide to the person wearing it?
5. After speaking about the whole armor of God there is a threefold repetition of the need to pray in Ephesians 6:18-20? Why is prayer important for the church and for us as individuals?
6. Read the letter to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7. For what is the church commended? Where has the church fallen short? What is the church exhorted to do?
7. Bonus – as we conclude eight weeks of going through Ephesians, what is a favorite verse(s) or passage that you will strive to remember and follow?