

On a nice snowy, icy, cold spring day, 8 of your most devoted men assembled in the downstairs fellowship room for some food and devotions. Again Mark abandoned his post and I had to “assume the watch.” And again, I not only had the minutes but the devotions as well.

I started the morning off with a battle with the coffee. I forgot that I was making coffee for some well-aged maybe a little pampered men not for a mid-watch onboard ship. Was the coffee strong? Warren was my tester but he took his time so John jumped in and gave it a try. All I know is that John had two cups of coffee. He poured the first one into two cups and added water to both! No one who tried the coffee fell asleep during devotions. Gene provided the fine meal. We had a casserole and some fruit plus a view donuts. I asked Gene what was in the casserole and with his hesitation; I came to the conclusion that maybe he didn’t prepare it. But we all enjoyed it anyway. During our meal some interesting topics came up. Did you know one of our members is an avid evangelist for squirrels? He is responsible for capturing and converting hundreds of squirrels. I asked him what denomination they become and he said, “Depends if I release them at a Catholic Church or our Church.” He is currently trying to convert a raccoon but cannot seem to get his hands on him yet. I heard a conversation from some of the guys who were proud to be responsible for cleaning the Men’s Bathroom during our Spring cleaning – which followed our MPB. I also heard that if you were born around Norway you actually came out with an umbrella – amazing! Finally we got on the topic of different synods within the Lutheran faith and how we are amazingly different.

I had devotions and used my lesson plan from the confirmation class’s recent annual trip to Shekinah. The entire class plus Stacey and I attended. We had a great time sharing our faith with 21 congregations and 175 people. If you didn’t know Shekinah is a Hebrew word that means that time and place when God comes to God’s people in the place where they are and feels his or her suffering and sorrows.

This year’s theme was “Here I Stand, I cannot do otherwise.” We started the devotions talking about Martin Luther and the stand he made. His most noble words and perhaps the most notable words spoken in the Reformation, this according to early printed reports, was Luther's reply at Worms when urged to recant. He uttered the memorable lines in German on April 18, 1521, and then, upon request, repeated their gist in Latin for those who did not understand his native tongue. He was sweating, said witnesses. With a victory gesture he slipped out of the room.

“Since your majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason--I do not accept the authority of popes and councils for they have contradicted each other--my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me. Amen.”

Where do You Stand when entering a crossroad? How does your identify as a Child of God make a difference when you “stand at the crossroads?” How do the armor of God and the ability to “stand up and raise your heads” help you make a stand?

Where Do You Stand? Jeremiah was a prophet who warned the nation of Judah to change their ways. When God called him, Jeremiah protested because he felt that he was too young and that no one would listen to him. Perhaps he was right, but that didn’t stop him from doing what God called him to do. Here he delivers a message from God to the people. God is challenging them to make “good choices” based on all that God has taught them. But the people were confused about who and whose they were – God’s chosen people, NOT the servants of Babylon, a foreign country. God wanted them to focus on their traditions, what they have learned in life, rather than on the “new, bright, shiny things” that the Babylonians were using to distract them from their calling as God’s people.

Jermiah 6:16 reads: Thus says the LORD: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, "We will not walk in it."

God asked them to Stand and look. To take the right road but they choose not to.

What do you stand for?

Before we can figure out where we stand, it's helpful to understand "how" we stand – in other words, who are we? What's our identity?

In Luke, Jesus has just come into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey – it was Palm Sunday. Jesus has cleared the temple of the money changers, answered some really silly questions from the Pharisee about marriage and taxes. And he has predicted the destruction of the Temple. Not only that, he has told the disciples that they will be arrested and persecuted and they will be called upon to give witness to Jesus. In just a few days, Satan will enter Judas' heart and Jesus will go to the cross. Jesus is warning them that the mother of all storms is coming over the horizon. The disciples are scared and the only question they know to ask is "when will this happen?" In true Jesus fashion, instead of answering their question, he tells them what they are supposed to do in the face of the coming storm.

Luke 21:27-28 reads: Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

The disciples are getting ready to go through some really scary stuff – they will see Jesus hanging from the cross but they don't know it yet. What does Jesus tell them to do in the face of the troubling times? Get up on their feet and hold their head high. This is the OPPOSITE of what we WANT to do, what our instincts tell us to do when we are scared.

Jesus knows what fear – which is the opposite of faith – can do to us. Fear can make us think stupid things, do things that make no sense and say stuff that is just silly! He gave us hope in the redemption of the cross. God calls us to stand up and face into the wind of the storm, not hide from it. He doesn't expect us to face the storm without any protection. The apostle Paul describes these gifts as pieces of battle armor to withstand the storm.

Ephesians 6:10-17 reads: Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 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. 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. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 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. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

God gave us the tools to "stand up and raise your heads..." and face in to the wind of the storm. He gave us the whole armor of God: belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, sword.

The Belt of Truth: Truth is the quality or state of being true, real, actual. When we talk about truth today, we are talking about telling the truth and being an honest and trustworthy person. Paul started with Truth because Truth is the foundation of everything we do.

The Breastplate of Righteousness: Righteousness is making just decisions and offering fair solutions to problems. God is righteous through Jesus. God has promised to be faithful to us...and God's righteousness means that God will keep that promise. God is righteous and wants us to be righteous. Being righteous with others when we are wronged means being fair and showing forgiveness; this is really hard! How can you become righteous? You don't. God does it. Righteousness is a partnership between you and God. Just as a breastplate protects your heart physically, righteousness protects your heart spiritually. As we live faithfully in obedience to and in communion with Jesus, his righteousness produces in us practical daily righteousness.

The Shoes of the Gospel: The Gospel of Peace is the inner peace that comes from knowing God and the Good News of the Gospel. God's peace is provided to comfort us like nothing else can - it secures us and calms us and gives us strength. We say, "The peace of the Lord be with you...and also with you" during worship because we are proclaiming the gospel of peace.

The Shield of Faith: Faith is trusting in God's word and God's promises for us. It is not about scientific proof, but about trusting in things that cannot be proven. Why do you think Paul used the imagery of 'flaming arrows'? What's the difference between shooting a normal arrow and one that has been dipped in oil and then lit on fire? What happens when each hits its target? The fire spreads out and consumes the person. Just like temptation; once it hits you, it spreads out and consumes you like fire. What are some of the 'flaming arrows' in your lives? What things are you tempted by?

The Helmet of Salvation: Salvation is our ultimate gift from God, given to us freely and unmerited – we receive it our baptisms. When you were baptized, on your forehead was placed a cross with oil and the words "Child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." The mark is the sign of God's promise of salvation for us. When we make the sign of the cross, we remind ourselves of this promise – that we are saved.

The Sword of the Spirit: Why does Paul define the Sword of the Spirit as the word of God? Through reading and studying the Bible, we learn about God's story of salvation for all of humankind. It also teaches us about God's desire for relationships: God's relationships with us and our relationships with each other.

So how does the whole armor of God work together? One possibility believes in the promises of God, we trust through our faith that our salvation comes to us as a gift from God. Strengthened in this way, we are then sent out into the world to share this good news with others through our daily lives.

Paul writes in Ephesians 6:18: "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." Paul tells us to keep our eyes open. Why do you think that is important? Have you ever changed your mind about a person – have you ever had your eyes opened and began to see someone in a different light?

God is quite clear, and so is Jesus, that everyone is invited and included in the kingdom of heaven – the partial kingdom here on earth and the full kingdom that is to come.

God has loved you, loves you currently, and will always love you. As a baptized child of God, you are a part of the community of God's whether you like it or not and whether you believe it or not. God has claimed you once and for all time!

In Luther's time, the church was not a "well-oiled" machine that worked well together. People – the poor people – were being left out of church. They weren't allowed to take communion or, if they were, they were not allowed to partake in the cup. This really bothered him.

The armor of God helps us to think about the message that we send to the world and gives us things to help us do that so that the Gospel of peace can be proclaimed in, with, and through our lives as we go out into the world.

Many of us just don't have the courage or confidence to talk about our faith. Maybe it's because we just haven't practiced but maybe we have and don't realize it. When you wear a shirt with LCOC written on it or display our LCOC bumper sticker on your car, or wear a cross around your neck – aren't you "talking" about your faith without saying a word? We can make our stand because we have the armor of God.

That is it for devotions; please join us next month as Lloyd leads us in devotions. God Bless you all. Ray Sutton