

1 Sermon, March 27, 2011

Text: Mark 14:43-52, 2 Corinthians 11:24-31, Ephesians 6:13-18

Title: "Saving Your Skin"

Central Idea: God is our protection

1. Mark story; Nakedness = exposure/vulnerability
2. We live in a time of anxiety/vulnerability
3. God offers a way out
4. Running away (Mark)
5. Perseverance (2 Corinthians)
6. Spiritual resources for perseverance (Ephesians)

1. Mark story; Nakedness = exposure/vulnerability

When the bible speaks of nakedness, one of the things it means is vulnerability. Being naked means being exposed.

Just like the story of this unnamed young man in the Gospel reading, who the crowd tried to grab, but who ran away. The others had already fled, and then this young man fled, too.

It is not a story of cowardice. This young man stayed after the others fled. Instead, it's a story of a man whose vulnerability was exposed, and who hid his nakedness in the only available way: running away.

I read a similar story about a Vietnamese man, Hien Pham, who in the 1950s was arrested and jailed by Communist forces because he was a Christian.

After his release from prison, Pham made plans to escape from Vietnam. He secretly began building a boat. Fifty-three of his friends made plans to escape with him.

One day, four Vietcong soldiers came to Pham's house and confronted him. They heard he was planning an escape. Was it true? Hien Pham lied to them. If he had told the truth, the Vietcong might have killed him and arrested the other fifty-three participants.

You can imagine how naked and vulnerable he felt.

Hien Pham felt exposed when the Vietcong soldiers came and saw he was building a boat.

2 **Sermon, March 27, 2011**

2. We live in a time of anxiety/vulnerability

We live in a time of anxiety, when many people are feeling vulnerable and exposed.

We see natural disasters like the Japan earthquake, Hurricane Katrina or the floods we've had in Wisconsin and think that something similar might happen to us.

We remember September 11, 2001, and how our whole country has been feeling more naked and vulnerable since then.

Jobs are far less secure. Even when secure, the automatic raises that people used to count on are just not there. We wonder about Social Security, too.

Our homes are worth less than they were. There seem to be protests all around the world. Our Wisconsin government, which ten years ago presided over great surpluses, is fighting over who must pay.

Even when we have some benefit, like good health insurance, or a good vacation policy, or a tax break that others don't have, we may feel the other guy is looking at us with jealous eyes, wanting what we have.

So we sometimes feel naked and vulnerable.

3. God offers a way out

Fortunately, the grace of God can help us. God may not take away our feelings of vulnerability and exposure, but God helps us to cope with them; to come to peace with our vulnerability.

4. Running away (Mark)

One of the ways we may do this is simply by protecting ourselves. There is nothing wrong with running away, or a strategic retreat, if you prefer. In fact, prayer can be a place we run away to. When confused and feeling vulnerable, turning to prayer may be the retreat that helps us regroup to face the challenges.

Running away from the problem to a friend or counselor may be just what God wants us to do, because then we can gain wisdom that only someone else's perspective can bring. Going to a counselor requires honesty about our vulnerability, and that in itself is a kind of strength.

3 Sermon, March 27, 2011

When Hien Pham, the Vietnamese Christian I mentioned before planned to escape by boat, that was not a sign of weakness. It was a sign of prudence.

I've run away many times, to retreat to prayer, or juts to get a little space as I made a decision. I've even run away physically. I remember a time when I lived in Boston and was on the subway. A man looked over at me threateningly, and said, "I don't like your face!"

I told him, "I don't always like it, either." But he didn't think it was funny. Then there was silence, and after a minute, I edged a little further away from that man, and he didn't bother me again.

5. Perseverance (2 Corinthians)

We may sometimes need to run away for a while, but that's not what God wants us to do most of the time. The Bible speaks much more often of patience, faithfulness and perseverance.

That's what the Apostle Paul talks about in today's reading from 2 Corinthians:

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus (blessed be he forever!) knows that I do not lie. (2 Corinthians 11:24-31, NRSV).

It may not sound at much like good news, with all the suffering Paul went through to tell of Jesus. But God sustained him through it all. God gave him the spiritual strength to endure.

Paul praised God's power to see him through.

6. Spiritual resources for perseverance (Ephesians)

God gives us spiritual resources to keep going, to keep up the faith.

God's protection is like God clothing our vulnerability, covering our nakedness, and protecting us from the storms of life.

4 Sermon, March 27, 2011

One of the most powerful images for God's protection and resources is the passage from Ephesians on the whole armor of God.

As in many parts of the Bible, Ephesians takes something that was commonly understood, and turned it on its head.

You see, the armor described in this passage is the equipment of a Roman soldier, and Roman soldiers were not kind to Christians. Roman soldiers often beat, arrested or jailed Christian. They were the ones who enforced any anti-Christian edict of the Emperor, including feeding some to lions.

So when the writer of Ephesians speaks of the armor of God, it is to contrast spiritual armor, which is internal and which does not hurt anyone, to the armor of those who *do* hurt others.

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, ... 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. 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. 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. (Ephesians 6:13-18, NRSV).

This spiritual armor sustains us in times of vulnerability and exposure. Bad things may happen, but the spiritual armor allows us to endure:

First, there is the belt of truth.

Remember that story about Hien Pham that I started to tell at the beginning of the sermon. Hien Pham had decided to tell the truth if the soldiers came back. He decided that he should not lie, because God would provide for him in any circumstances. Even though it made no logical sense, Pham believed that God wanted him to tell the truth, even at the risk of his own life.

Well, Hien Pham had finished his boat, and he and his friends were making final plans for their voyage of escape. Just then the four Vietcong soldiers returned and asked again if the rumors were true that Hien Pham was going to use the boat to escape. Pham confessed his plans, and to his surprise, the soldiers said, "Take us with you!"

That evening, Pham, his 53 friends and four Vietcong soldiers made a daring escape under cover of night on a homemade boat. But

5 Sermon, March 27, 2011

that's not the end of the story. They sailed straight into a violent storm, and would not have made it if they hadn't had the expert sailing skills of those four Vietcong soldiers.

Because Pham had told the truth, they landed safely in Thailand. He later came to the United States and made a new life for himself.

In times of vulnerability, speak the truth!

Second, Ephesians says we are to put on the "breastplate of righteousness." Righteousness means simply doing the right thing. When in doubt, do what you know is right. There is tremendous comfort in that. File your income taxes; obey the traffic lights. Write a letter to your loved ones, call up a friend and listen, plant a tree.

We are also to take the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation. This really means placing our trust in God, for the short term and the long term. Faith means just trusting that it's going to be OK; that God's love was made plain on the cross, and God will never stop loving us. Salvation means looking at Christ's triumph over the grave, and giving us new life. If Christ could triumph over even death, we can face anything that comes our way, knowing that God will triumph in the end. And we can trust God in this life and beyond it.

Lastly, the passage says to put on the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. This is the only piece of armor mentioned that can act to hurt others. So we need to be careful how we use scripture. Scripture is not a weapon to prove that I'm right and you're wrong.

Instead, the word of God is powerful enough to humble us, to change our minds, to give us hope, and to build a community of those who love God. The word of God is active, not passive, and transforms those of us who are open to it.

This image of the whole armor of God shows us that we have great spiritual resources. God's protection is much greater than any physical armor or weapon we could hold. As Psalm 33 says:

A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield. (Psalms 33:16-21, NRSV).

Thanks be to God. Amen.

6 Sermon, March 27, 2011

Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled." All of them deserted him and fled. A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked. (Mark 14:43-52, NRSV).

"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. 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. 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." Ephesians 6:13-18, NRSV.

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