

**GOD EMPOWERS HIS CHURCH TO STAND AS ONE AGAINST SATAN'S ATTACKS**

Our theme verse for this twenty-first Sunday after the feast of the Holy Trinity is from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Hear it afresh:

*Finally, all of you be empowered in (the) Lord, and in the might of His strength. All of you must be clothed with the full armor of God, for the purpose of (having) your power to stand against the scheming of the slanderer.<sup>1</sup>*

**Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

This year, today's readings fall in the midst of St. Michaeltide. This is the time when we remember that Satan, and the angels who fell with him, were cast to earth. That means that they can no longer fill the roles of accusers of God's people before God as He rules in judgement in the heavenly realms. It also means that the faithful in Christ have great and terrible enemies all about us.

It is in the nature of fallen angels to slander the faithful before God. Therefore, they attack, try to separate, and use all their millennia of wily tricks to attempt to lead people of the Faith to stray from God's promises. They, following Satan the Great Accuser of man, cannot lead to the fall of anyone in the heavens. So they work in the realm to which they have been cast in order to bring about the fall of the faithful on earth. That is one reason why the Apostle calls out to the faithful who are called to stand firm, united in the Faith against the accuser and his minions:

*Finally, all of you be empowered in (the) Lord, and in the might of His strength. All of you must be clothed with the full armor of God, for the purpose of (having) your power to stand against the scheming of the slanderer.<sup>2</sup>*

It appears that, on account the Church's call to stand against the Satan's wiles, the faithful in the Church Militant – the Church on earth – placed today's readings, long, long ago, into this part of the Church Year. Some of you have learned that the ending weeks of Trinity, in the division of St. Michael and All Angels, may last up to five

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 6:10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 6:10-11.

weeks. More of you might remember that the last section of the Church Year, entitled, “The Struggle Against Satan,” is three weeks long. It is so every year.

That means that, depending upon the length of the Trinity Season, today’s pericopes (cuttings from Scripture) may fall either into Michaeltide or “Struggle Against Satan-tide.” They fit equally well in either section. For, if they are read in years like this, they may be used to emphasize endurance in the baptized. In years of shorter Michaeltides, the same readings may be used to emphasize hope in those who continue to receive Christ in Holy Communion.

Four years ago, the day’s text proclaimed the latter, the sure and certain hope we are given in Communion with our Lord and one another at His Table. “God’s Word for the last Sundays of the Church Year is proclaimed to bring encouragement to us ‘soldiers of the Cross.’”<sup>3</sup> In the year 2012, three days later, Reformation texts followed the readings you have heard today. Among other Church Militant themes, those readings declare the God Who is the Fortress Who stands against the wiles of the evil foe and his fallen forces.

I find it interesting to note, and perhaps you do too now all that has been pointed out: The Reformation began in the time of the Church when were traditionally proclaimed: St. Michael and All Angels, with the theme of endurance in the baptized; or, The Struggle Against Satan, with the theme of hope in the communicants. In the year 1517, according to the Julian Calendar then in use, Christians may have heard today’s texts on the day immediately following Dr. Luther’s posting of the “95 Theses.” (We know they heard from them in the years following, as we have translated copies of Dr. Luther’s sermons for Trinity XXI from 1522, 1533, 1534, and 1562 in this building. On each of those Sundays he preached on the Gospel text you heard today).

All of that having been declared, the reality is that this Sunday is one in which every year the Church Militant has for centuries been empowered by God through His Word. They as you, were called to *be clothed with the full armor of God*. To what end? Our

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<sup>3</sup> Morehouse. 2012, *The Church’s Struggle Against Satan*, Tucson. 2

text answers: *for the purpose of (having) your power to stand against the scheming of the slanderer.* God has continued to do that so that the members of His Church at war with spiritual forces might have His power to stand *in the might of His strength.*

Is that not what we asked for this day, when we prayed, *by Your Holy Spirit so quicken our hearts that we in daily prayer may seek our help in Christ against all temptations, and, constantly believing His promise, obtain that for which we pray, and at last be saved?*<sup>4</sup>

Is not it the empowerment the Church and her members united in Christ prayed for in the ancient Collect for this day: *Lord, we beseech thee to keep thy household, the Church, in continual godliness; that through thy protection it may be free from all adversities...?*

The might of God's strength we began to proclaim today as the greater than 2,000-year-old Introit antiphon was read: *The whole world is in Your power, O Lord, King Almighty: there is no man that can contradict You.* It continued in declaring God's creation of man in His image and restoring man through forgiveness in Christ. The word continued to build you up as one as you recited the Gradual's: *Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations... to... from everlasting to everlasting you are God.* Following the Epistle reading, the Gospel read into your ears taught that Christ restores to new life those for whom believers intercede.

Now, the Spirit through the Apostle's words proclaims that the faithful will stand against the attacks of the Satan. God Who equips you leads you to follow our Head, Christ Jesus the Lord of the heavens, the earth, and all that is under the earth. That continues to happen as you remain locked together in the full armor of God, *for the purpose of (having) your power to stand against the scheming of the slanderer.*

This is a "soldier's text" day in the Church Year. It is for all those to whom God has given Christ's Faith. They are you who continue to be outfitted by God's Word for the spiritual (and sometimes physical and emotional (not to mention financial and governmental)) attacks that come upon those who wish to remain faithful in Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich, Viet. 1519? *Collect for Trinity XXI.*

Those of you who have, or are, taking CLC's Adult Instruction and Refreshment Class should be quite aware of the import of today's Epistle reading. You know that it tells how God empowers his Church to stand as one against the Satan's attacks.

Now, for those who think, in error, that this day's readings declare how you as an individual are equipped to stand against the Slanderer, there is a truth to be declared. That is this: all the military equipment used in the description of God's spiritually equipping the members of His Church Militant in today's text, all of it, serves for the defensive battle. This day's texts make it clear – from the Fall of Adam to the healing of the official's son – all of them declare that God equips the faithful to stand together.

The texts also teach that when one tries to stand against the accuser of man, even when equipped with the Word of God, apart from Christ and without the support of fellow believers, that one will fall. That began in the Garden. There Eve was deceived into using the Word of God incorrectly. Adam did not stand to spiritually support her to call her back to that Word.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul was moved to record how the faithful, after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension may stand when the ancient accuser of man comes at those who are in the Church. A decade ago, this congregation asked for a more in-depth study of this day's text. For us, then, due to the war in Iraq, the military analogies used by the Apostle were closer to our congregational experience.

Today, they are still pertinent, as we are still at war. This congregation regularly, monthly it seems, continues to support those who donned defensive armor in our nation's war against terror. We are blessed with members of this congregation who served in combat in World War II, the Korean Conflict, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and the Global War on Terror, among other conflicts. As they headed into their theaters of operations, they were issued personal protective equipment – helmets, boots, uniforms, utility belts, body armor, side arms, and the like.

So it has been for those serving in nations' armed forces for millennia. It was extremely rare that any one person was equipped to stand alone against the forces of the enemies of his or her land. St. Paul uses a military analogy from his era to explain that which God gives His Christian soldiers that enables them to stand together against the attacks of the devil and his fallen angels.

Don't answer this question too quickly: How many of you think that the Apostle just came up with the whole armor of God illustration on his own through just the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit?

Many of you recognize that to be a set-up question. A few of you, as you prepared for today's Divine Service, likely did some background work on this text. Those who did that might know that the Holy Spirit used the previously declared, recorded and inerrant Word of God to set up today's military analogies.

The images he puts forth of several garments worn by God's faithful had been first used by the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah speaks of the belt of righteousness and being girded about the waist in faithfulness (Is. 11:5). He images a breastplate of righteousness (Is. 59:17). He tells of feet shod to bring the Good News and to proclaim peace. He declares a helmet of salvation (Is. 59:17).

To those military equipment comparisons to the elements of spiritual defensive armor, the Apostle was moved to add, from his witness of first century Roman military supplies; the shield of the Faith, and the short sword of the Spirit. (For you who may be thinking that sword is an offensive implement of war, it is not. It is may be likened to the .45 pistol, or 9mm Beretta of our era of combatants. It is kept close by, at one's side – but if you have to use it, you have let the enemy get way too near you)!

All Christians are issued, by God, the full armor they need to stand together when the devil gets too close. Where did you receive the *full armor of God*, that *grace that is in*

*Christ Jesus* which presents you prepared in the fight against evil?<sup>5</sup> Do you remember the dual themes of this Sunday when it falls in the division of the season called Michaeltide?

It is used to emphasize endurance in the baptized. So, you endure as you return to your baptisms daily, and remember God's work as you pass the font on the Lord's Day. There you remember God's clothing you in the white robes of the saints. With the water and the Word, you have been clothed in Christ' armor.

Your "battle-rattle" as this generation of soldiers calls their personal equipment, God issues to you in the Faith. This spiritual warfare equipment is really all Christ. It was not issued that you may stand alone when the accuser of man comes at you to try to pull you away from the protection you have in the battle formation into which you have been joined and in which you are led by Jesus. St. Paul declares as much when he says:

*Because for us the hand-to-hand fight does not remain with blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the worldly strong ones of this darkness, against the spirits of the evil one in the heavenly (realms).<sup>6</sup>*

We are engaged in hand-to-hand combat with spiritual forces. They attempt to pull us away from our fellow Christian soldiers. As we remain in our God-given defensive gear, standing locked arm-to-arm with shields in front and above, short swords sticking out between the shields, we remain safe against all the devil's attacks.

St. Paul declares who and what we stand united against. They are the demon rulers who have their own principalities. They are the authorities who exercise might over their individual areas. They are worldly strong men of this age who rule according to evil intents – exercising their authority in the realm of darkness and the shadow of death. They are the spirits of the evil one in the heavenly places: theirs is a dominion that extends over all this earth.

United under Christ, clothed in His bloodied armor, we are empowered to stand against such horrible enemies. We, the individual members of the Church are called to be joined together in defense. We are one in Christ, equipped by Him to bear all things that

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *II Timothy* 2:1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ephesians* 6:12.

would separate us from the love of God that is in Him. When the devil joins us in close battle, he confronts his defeat in the congregation united by God's Word. We declare that which fells him – Christ conquered the slanderer of man on the cross.

**The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**

Trinity XXI (*LSB* One-year series)

Genesis 1:1-2:3; Ephesians 6:10-17; John 4:46-54

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***Soli Deo Gloria***