

13 Pentecost 2021

*Psalm 18: 1-3*

18 I will love You, O Lord, my strength.

2 The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer;

My God, my [a]strength, in whom I will trust;

My shield and the [b]horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

3 I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised;

So shall I be saved from my enemies.

Some weeks just seem to bring one problem after another. Some of you might be able to relate. The septic tank backs up, the roof leaks, the car breaks down, a child is sick, or God forbid, a loved one dies. They are all a part of life and they will happen. Of course, if you are not the one directly affected, it is a little easier to deal with. Since June of this year, The Michigan Region of the Red Cross has witnessed a significant run of disasters. It has been a busy year. There have been 6 disaster relief operations in response to flooding, severe wind damage, and widespread power outages. The Red Cross has always been responsive for family home fires that occur far too often. But there have also been a lot of large apartment fires this year. Just in the past week, there was an apartment fire in Holt involving 63 units. Tragically, one person died. I am a

Spiritual Care provider for the Red Cross, so I try to be available to as many of those who ask for help as possible.

There are often no words that will suffice for someone who has lost everything in a flood or a fire. Out west, entire towns have been destroyed by fire and in the South, those who were already homeless often lose what little they have in a hurricane. It is not uncommon when we are hit from every side by disaster after another that we look toward heaven and ask; **“Why God”? Why me?**

There is a story in the Bible that we know pretty well. This person had every reason to ask “Why”. He lived in the land of Uz. Not Oz but Uz. His name is Job.

We are told that he was blameless in the sight of God, that he feared God, and shunned evil.

“<sup>2</sup>Job had seven sons and three daughters, <sup>3</sup>and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.” He had everything going for him.

Just in case his children might have sinned or cursed God in their hearts, every day he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them. What a great dad.

<sup>6</sup>” One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them. <sup>7</sup>The Lord said to Satan, “Where have you come from?”

Satan answered the Lord, "From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it."

8Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."

9"Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. 10"Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. 11But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face."

12The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man, himself do not lay a finger."

Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

13One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, 14a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, 15and the Sabeanes attacked and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

16While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, “The fire of God fell from the heavens and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!”

17While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, “The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!”

18While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, “Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother’s house, 19when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!”

20At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship 21and said: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart.

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;  
may the name of the Lord be praised.”

22In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.”

As we know, this is not the end of Job being tested.

Job is an extreme example of calamity. But I have discovered that it is not the severity of evil, a natural disaster, death, or even bad luck, that determine how a person reacts. People respond differently to trauma. I cannot imagine what the people of Haiti are going through right now. A 7.0 earthquake in 2010. A 7.2 earthquake 8 days ago followed quickly by tropical storm Grace. Over 1,400 people have died, at least 7,000 are injured, and thousands more are still missing. In the days following the initial quake, aftershocks of up to 5.6 on the Richter scale have hit the country as well. Tens of thousands of Haitians, including Christians, have been left homeless after the earthquake and the tropical storm has hindered timely rescue efforts.

Like Job, they must be crying out, "Enough already". Like Job, we do not always have control over what comes at us.

The point being, is that human struggles are a reality for all of us.

As with Job, we face disasters, heartbreak, hurdles, adversity, trauma, and evil in the world every day. Everything depends upon how we face it and the protections that we have built up throughout our lives. Paul talks about protective armor, and for many of us, what comes to mind are the knights of old or the protective armor that our soldiers wear. Personally, my mind goes toward Captain America's shield or Iron Man's ever-improving armor. Paul would have been referring to a typical Roman Soldier's armor. The average

Roman soldier carried 60 to 100 pounds of armor and weapons. The first layer worn by the soldier underneath all the layers of armor was the tunic, a loose garment which was typically sleeveless and reached the knees. On top of the tunic, there were three main types of metal armor worn on the chest. The first was a chain armor which consisted of small metal rings linked together in a pattern to form a mesh, producing very flexible, reliable, and strong armor. However, it was hard to make and expensive. The second was a plate armor which consisted of pieces of iron fastened to internal leather straps. And the third was a scale armor which consisted of overlapping bronze or iron scales. This was the cheapest of the three but also the least flexible. There was also a belt. This belt was so wide and thick that it protected the stomach and lower abdomen and prevented them from being eviscerated.

The helmet was a signature piece for a Roman soldier. It was called the galea.

The galea provided protection to not just the head, but also the neck and parts of the face. Finally, they carried a sword and shield.

If you were a first-century Christian, there is one thing you definitely were afraid of. It was a man in iron-and-leather armor with a bronze helmet on his head, a short sword at his waist and a spear in his hand. This man — a Roman soldier — could walk through a hostile crowd of ordinary citizens in their robes of cloth, and they would move aside to make way for him. Partly it was

because of his armor, and his sharp weapons, but even more than that, it was the authority this man stood for: the authority of Caesar.

To Christians in Ephesus who were afraid of a man in armor, the apostle writes a rather extraordinary thing: telling them they, too, can be equipped with armor. This armor is not made of leather, steel, or bronze. It is an armor of the spirit.

Paul adapts these protective parts when he talks about Christians fighting evil forces in this world and the 'heavenly realms'. This is not surprising. He was not talking about Christians going on the offensive attacking any one group of people, especially the Romans. He was talking about standing up in a defensive posture ready to fend off attacks. And the primary source for these attacks would come from Satan and his minions.

Paul talks a lot about community and relationships this morning. Especially our relationships with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. He also reminds the Ephesians and us that we are "members of one another".

(4:25), Paul encourages them to withstand the piercing attack of sin and temptation that threatened to separate and destroy them all individually. It was vital that they remain in community with each other. Strength in numbers. It is interesting that the Roman army operated within this same concept. The

Roman shield was not just for individual protection. When preparing for an attack, the first row of defense placed their shields standing up with each shield interlocking with the one next to them. This formed a cohesive wall. The next row held the shield above their heads protecting themselves as well as those in the front from arrows coming in from above.

Each soldier back then as well as those today, look out for each other and protect each other.

Paul talks about the 'Belt of Truth", the "breastplate of righteousness" (v. 14), the "helmet of salvation" and the 'Shield of Faith'. Each has a purpose in the Christian's armament. It's fitting that the apostle writes, in Ephesians 6:16, of "the shield of faith," because faith is most effectively exercised not in isolation, but in community. Paul was indeed talking to a Christian community, not to specific Christians.

One of the problems with society today is individualism, even among Christians. Americans pride themselves on it and we are good at it. But so many people are hurting and suffering in isolation.

So many Christians see no need to worship, to pray, or even to gather in community. It was a problem prior to the pandemic but even more so now. Trying to manage life on one's own is fine as long as things go well. But once

difficulties arise, fatigue and weakness can set in. Then Satan strikes the mind, the heart, and the soft underbelly. **Christians do better together.** Finally, we are to share the Good News with everyone that we meet and to pray for all of God's people.

As I said earlier, our readings today are about relationships, especially with the Trinity. Paul says to 'Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes'. Well to do that, you need to know God. Jesus has done his best to tell us how we can do that.

He is talking about one of the most intimate relationships that we can have.

The "true bread" that Jesus offers is the kind that brings people into a deep relationship with God. Breaking bread with someone was a sign of true intimacy in the ancient world — a sign that those who participated in the meal were bonded for life.

In a shocking reinterpretation of this tradition, Jesus offers himself to the world as "bread" — the means through which God and humanity become bonded for eternal and abundant life. "Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me ... he who feeds on me will live forever" (v. 57-58 NIV). "Feeding" on Jesus is a means of taking in all that he offers — the satisfying fullness of salvation, the

daily nutrients of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the strength to live life to the full with an eternal perspective. This is amazing to say the least. Yet there were those who walked away just as many do today. In the search to fill the gnawing emptiness inside, people turn to a wide variety of other stuff that ultimately leaves them starving to death: things like money, sex, power, fame, toys, **more toys**, and acceptance, **wherever they can find it**. Regardless of denomination traditions, and how one defines Eucharist, the 'real' bread connects us deeply and spiritually with God through Christ. We are nourished by the grace we receive, encouraged by the diverse people around us, and strengthened against the trials that we will inevitably face. There's no substitute for the love and joy that we experience when we break the Bread of Life. Like Peter we cry out, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."

No one escapes this life without facing trials. But Jesus is never far away. We have only to keep him close to our hearts and to share His love with others. Those are the relationships that we need to cultivate and are important to us as Christians. When we do that, we will never fail.

Amen!

