

Be Strong, Be Easter People

To conclude our sermon series on Ephesians, I'm going to do something just a little different this week. We have been referring to *The Message* as a way to further our understanding of Paul's instructions on how to grow up in Christ, but today, I'm going to read a few verses at a time, and then read Peterson's interpretation of those verses. Here are the last few verses of the letter, Ephesians 6:10-23

First, let's look at verses 10-12:

NRSV: 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. 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.

The MSG: And that about wraps it up. God is strong, and he wants you strong. So take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no afternoon athletic contest that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.

Verses 13-18 read:

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.

The MSG: Be prepared. You're up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it's all over but the shouting you'll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an *indispensable* weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other's spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.

Verses 19-20:

NRSV: 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, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak. MSG: And don't forget to pray for me. Pray that I'll know what to say and have the courage to say it at the right time, telling the mystery to one and all, the Message that I, jailbird preacher that I am, am responsible for getting out.

And finally, verses 21-23:

NRSV: So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus will tell you everything. He is a dear

brother and a faithful minister in the Lord. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, to let you know how we are, and to encourage your hearts.

Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

MSG: Tychicus, my good friend here, will tell you what I'm doing and how things are going with me. He is certainly a dependable servant of the Master! I've sent him not only to tell you about us but to cheer you on in your faith.

Good-bye, friends. Love mixed with faith be yours from God the Father and from the Master, Jesus Christ. Pure grace and nothing but grace be with all who love our Master, Jesus Christ.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Back in 2016, I preached a sermon series using James Moore's book *Noah Built His Ark in the Sunshine*. In that series, we uncovered some tools for preparing for the storms of life. Moore points out that when God told Noah to build an ark, he didn't wait: "Noah didn't wait for the rains to come, he started working on it immediately, in good weather days. He used those bright days to build up the resources he would need when the dark floodwaters came. The great people of faith have always done that."

In the same way, Paul is encouraging the Ephesians and us to sharpen the tools we will need to practice resurrection. We aren't meant to wait until we need said

tool, but to do the work of honing those skills in the sunshine, in good weather times, so that during stormy days and months, and even almost a whole year, we can do what Paul is calling on us to do, which is to stand firm.

In these last verses of the letter, Paul calls on us to stand four times. Eugene Peterson uses these four imperatives to describe where and how we should stand firm. He calls on us to stand firm in this place of blessing that we now inhabit, to stand firm in the church, to stand firm in the Spirit, and to stand firm in the practice of resurrection. I want to take a few minutes to look at these individually.

First, we are to stand firm in this place of blessing that we now inhabit. Peterson understands that Paul is calling on these new Christians to recognize that out of chaos, order has been created. In a world that criticizes, commands, and misunderstands, we are *at home* with God, and we have been drawn near to the heart of God. We dwell in this place together with God, and so we should stand firm on that promise.

When we recognize that we are blessed, that we are near to the heart of God, we can use those beautiful times in our lives to prepare for the hardest times. Glennon Doyle is an author and activist. She recently published a book called *Untamed*, and she opens the book by talking about a time when she took her daughters to the zoo and watched the main event, known as the cheetah run. Tabitha the cheetah had been raised with a labrador retriever named Minnie, and had been tamed to do what the dog did. This was demonstrated, and Glennon pointed out that at the end of the cheetah run, she couldn't clap, because she knew what that taming felt like. In the

middle of the book, as she's describing how she has come to find herself, she tells the reader and her family that "we can do hard things." Whether we are navigating the stormy days, or trying to figure out who we are, or just learning how to cope with everything that is in chaos around us, if we stand in this place of nearness to God, we too, can do hard things.

Peterson tells us that Paul is calling us to stand firm in the church. This one might be easier for some than it is for others. There are any number of reasons that we might find ourselves in a time of seeking, and that's okay. What's important is that once we find where we are meant to be, we stand firm in that place. We've talked a lot over the course of this series about how we are called into membership in the life of a congregation. There's a commitment there, one that is meant to be honored. Peterson argues, however, that we have a long way to go to assimilate to this idea, and most of that is because we haven't yet learned to disengage from the consumeristic society in which we live.

Church shopping in and of itself, trying to find the right place for you or your family, is not a bad thing, friends. If there ever has been a gift from COVID, it's that church shopping instantly became easier. I know of folks who spend most of their Sundays watching various church services now on line, and that is a wonderful thing! This week I was dropping off assistance checks at city hall for some OUM clients, and the city administrator just happened to be in the office. She jokingly made the statement that she has church on Sunday morning, Sunday nights, and Wednesday nights, but by the time she got to work it all went out the window. She needed

church every night of the week! I let her know that she has this at her fingertips, with just the click of a link on facebook or youtube. You need to worship during the week? Just find a church page and watch that service!

In all seriousness, though, when you do find that place that you feel called to, stay there. Don't take church for granted, friends. To shopkeepers we are customers, to our physicians and counselors we are clients, to the unscrupulous we are victims to be exploited, but to the church we are invaluable. Be careful with this, though. Yes, we are invaluable to our church family, but be sure that we are not placing too much of an emphasis on our own worth, and not enough emphasis on God's presence in our midst. Remember that the church is previous to us—God created the world, Christ created the church, and we are called here for such a time as this, to do hard things, joyful things, uplifting things, in partnership with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Which leads to the third area in which we are to stand firm, in the Spirit. When we stand firm in the Spirit, we become acutely aware of God's presence in our lives. The Spirit is God's presence, and is with us wherever we go. Peterson writes that "Spirit is God in relationship: by means of The Spirit our spirits enter the relationship with God and with one another." He goes on to write:

Don't settle for anything secondhand, hand-me-downs. We are immersed in a world of gifts, Spirit-gifts. Our lives are made up of gifts, gifts given and received. A gift is always reciprocal—without receiving there is no gift, without giving there is no gift. A gift withheld is no gift. And until it is received a gift doesn't really become a gift. Grace is another

word for this comprehensive and continuous interchange between all the operations of the Trinity in us, which we then practice with one another—the practice of resurrection.

Now, I'm the youngest in my family, which means I did get a lot of hand-me-downs, and I treasured them because I thought my sister was just the coolest, hippest person in the world. And if I'm honest I still think that. Getting her second-hand clothes that she has outgrown did not bother me in the *least*. I adored these gifts. But what I think Peterson means here is that we should not try to experience the gift of God's presence in a second-hand way. God's grace is there for each and everyone of us to experience first-hand, and we should! Don't take someone else's word for it, stand firm in God's presence, stand firm in God's gift of grace.

Finally, we are to stand firm in practicing resurrection. This goes back to Moore's idea that we should cultivate our spiritual toolbox on good-weather days so that we are ready for the hard days. We *can* do hard things, because we are prepared. Once we get to this point, we become Easter people. Once we are steadily and daily practicing resurrection, we have truly shed our old selves and radiate with God's goodness.

I am sure that you have all had your fair share of bad weather days. I know that you have all experienced hard things, and maybe you're living in it right now. But I also know that with God's help, we can do hard things. With God's presence permeating our lives, we can shine in the dark places. With the strength that can truly come only from God, we can, and we do, become strong Easter people.

Peterson ends his book *Practice Resurrection* with this final thought:

There is more to the church than sermons and sacraments, theology and liturgy, Bible studies and prayer meetings, committee minutes and mission statements. There are names, meals, small talk, births, deaths. There is *us*. Conversation is the form that language takes when the persons of the Trinity and the persons of the congregation are in the same room. The “everything” that Tychicus will have to say to the Ephesians is no insignificant part of what it means to be the church. You and I *are* Tychicus.

You and I are the tellers of the story, friends. You and I are the practicers of resurrection. You and I are Easter people, and we are called to stand firm, to be strong, and do the hard things. And we are not just called, but we are able. By the grace of God, we have been given the gifts to practice resurrection even on the hardest days—the gift of prayer, the gift of Scripture, the gift of conversation, the gift of God’s presence, the gift of being so near to the heart of God, that we dwell with God. Rest in that knowledge, and know that we can do hard things. Amen.