

10.20.2024 Trinity 21 (Ephesians 6:10-20; John 4:46-54)

In our Epistle this morning, St. Paul exhorted Christians to “*be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.*” He instructed us to “*put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand*” (Ephesians 6:10-13).

Hopefully these words sound familiar. It was just three weeks ago, on the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, that this passage was used to reference the great, yet unseen, spiritual war that is raging in our midst. On that day, we considered the truth revealed in Holy Scripture that the war in the heavens is the war on this earth, and ultimately, it is the war in every one of us - the great conflict between good and evil. It’s not only the heavenly host, St. Michael and All Angels, which war against “*that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceives the whole world...*” (Revelation 12:9), but you and I who wrestle *against spiritual wickedness in high places.*

It’s in light of that truth, about our role in this great war, that St. Paul tells us to *take unto you the whole armor of God.* In this passage he speaks about that armor - the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace as the shoes which enable us stand firm-footed in battle; the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. Clearly, we are meant to recognize the necessity of each piece of armor listed here, and knowing that warriors don’t step onto the battlefield without having every part of their body protected, we can be certain that Christians are called into battle only when they’re protected by *the whole armor of God.*

Every piece of armor is necessary on the battlefield, but it’s the shield of faith that I’d ask you to consider with me today, that piece of armor which St. Paul tells us to take “*above all,*” for with it, “*you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one*” (Ephesians 6:16). When we think of the ancient warrior, we recognize the advantage of the shield, because unlike other pieces of defensive armor, such as the belt, breastplate, or the helmet, which are

fixed to a particular part of the body and designed to protect only that area, the shield is a movable defense. As such, it defends the warrior against dangers that come from any direction, and the shield that St. Paul would've been familiar with was made large enough to nearly cover one side of the person. This fact is reflected in the words of the psalmist, who wrote, "*For You, O LORD, will bless the righteous; With favor You will surround him as with a shield*" (Psalm 5:12).

Therefore, as we consider the shield of faith, we find it to be a large weapon of defense that we can move at will. Faith is a weapon that defends every part of the Christian soul against *the fiery darts of the wicked one*. No matter the direction from which the enemy attacks, faith is our defense, and in Holy Scripture we learn about the necessity of two types of faith: the faith, and our faith. Throughout the Bible we find examples of the objective, unchanging Christian faith *in* which we believe, and the subjective, personal faith *by* which we believe.

St. Augustine wrote about these two types of faith, telling his reader "but that which is believed is a different thing from the faith by which it is believed" (On the Trinity, Book 13). The faith which is believed (the Christian faith) is objective and external, while the faith by which we believe is subjective and personal. Consider these biblical examples of objective faith - the faith in which we believe. St. Paul told the Corinthians to "*Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith...*" (1 Corinthians 16:13). He wrote to the Ephesians, and said, "*There is one body, and one Spirit... one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...*" (Ephesians 4:4-6). St. Jude exhorted Christians to "*earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints*" (Jude 1:3).

Just as there is one Spirit, one Lord, one God and Father of all, there is one faith in which we believe, and this faith for which we earnestly contend was once delivered to the saints. You and I have been on this earth for a few short decades, but *the* faith was delivered once, twenty centuries ago. Clearly, the objective, unchanging faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the faith defended from heresy in Church councils, the faith we profess in the Creeds, the faith we hope to pass on to our children, grandchildren, family, and friends, the faith in which we believe, is a different thing from the personal faith by which it is

believed.

Personal faith, unlike the objective, unchanging Christian faith in which we believe, does change. Personal faith has a beginning, experiences growth, and by the grace of God someday reaches a point of full maturity. Personal faith is a gift from God that we can accept or reject. We get to choose whether to trust God, or trust ourselves. Personal faith is a gift we can treasure in this jar of clay, or a gift we can allow to be “*choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life*” (Luke 8:14).

Jesus spoke about personal faith when He commended the “*great faith*” of the centurion (Matthew 8:10), or when He said to the Canaanite woman, “*O woman, great is your faith...*” (Matthew 15:28), and our Lord also spoke of personal faith when He said to the Apostles in the midst of a storm, “*Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?*” (Matthew 8:26), or again on stormy seas, when He reached out His hand, took hold of Peter and said, “*O you of little faith, why did you doubt?*” (Matthew 14:31). The personal faith by which we believe can be *little* or *great*, because the gift of personal faith has a beginning, experiences growth, and by the grace of God someday reaches a point of full maturity, and our Gospel lesson today illustrates that truth.

The passage we read this morning is the story of a nobleman whose son was at the point of death. This nobleman, or perhaps we should say, this father, whose son was dying, had heard of Jesus, came to Him, and begged Him to come down, and heal his son. It’s often in such desperate need that we find the beginning of personal faith, a *little* faith that is still ignorant of the objective, unchanging faith in which it believes. Unlike the *great* faith of the centurion who told Jesus, “*Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed*” (Matthew 8:8), the little faith of the nobleman believed that our Lord had to physically come down to heal his son. As we see in the words he cried out, “*Sir, come down before my child dies*” (4:48).

This beginning of faith, as our Lord said in today’s Gospel lesson, still sought “*signs and wonders*” in order to believe (John 4:48), however, the nobleman and all who were present, wouldn’t receive a crowd-pleasing, miraculous sign and wonder. Instead, Jesus responded to his *little* faith with a command

and a promise. The command, was “*Go thy way,*” and the promise, “*thy son lives,*” and isn’t it true that God often responds to our little faith in the same way. Even though little faith demands, not thy will, but mine be done. Even though it insists on God obeying our command to come down and perform this miracle, God, in His gracious mercy, gives our faith the opportunity to grow, by offering us this choice to faithfully obey His command and to trust His promise.

Jesus commanded the father to “*go,*” and gave him a promise to believe, “*your son lives,*” and we’re told that “*the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way*” (4:50). Without a sign. Without a wonder. The man went his way. A father whose son was at the point of death took Jesus at His word. He obeyed His command, believed His promise, and the text tells us that while he was going home, “*his servants met him, and told him, saying, Thy son liveth*” (4:51).

By the grace of God, through obedience to His command, a little personal faith began to grow, and when faith is given the opportunity to grow, it opens up, reaches out, and finally begins to trust Jesus in all things. This fact is presented to us in the next verse, when the father asked his servants about the time that his son recovered, and they said to him, “*Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him. So the father knew that it was at the same hour in which Jesus said to him, Your son lives. And he himself believed, and his whole household*” (4:52-53).

In this Gospel text, we see the miraculous way personal faith can grow. In the beginning, the nobleman approached Jesus with just enough faith to ask for His help, “*Sir, come down before my child dies.*” This seed of faith grew through obedience to our Lord’s command, “*Go thy way,*” and through trust in His promise, “*thy son lives.*” Finally, faith reached a point of full maturity when the man was met by his servants, who told him his son recovered at the very hour Jesus spoke to him, and instead of dismissing all of this as a strange coincidence, we’re again told that the father believed, and his whole house.

Personal faith had its beginning, growth, maturity, and now we see the fruit of faith ripening on the tree. Our discussion today began with an image of the

shield of faith as a defensive weapon by which we are able to *quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one,*” and yet at the end of this passage, as the father shares his mature faith and his whole house believes, we see that faith not only accomplishes a defensive purpose, but also becomes an offensive weapon by which the gates of hell are overcome, and captives are set free - *“his whole household”* believed, his whole household was set free.

Holy Scripture describes our enemy as a thief that *“comes only to steal and kill and destroy”* (John 10:10). We’re told that *“the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour”* (1 Peter 5:8), and therefore St. Paul exhorts us to take *“above all”* the shield of faith, the objective Christian faith in which we believe, and the personal faith by which we believe. We desperately need both types of faith, because it’s through faith that we fight, it’s through faith we’re saved, saved *from* sin and death, and saved *for* a new life with Christ. May the prayer of the Apostles, *“Lord, increase our faith”* (Luke 17:5), be a prayer answered in our lives, to the glory of God.