

August 22, 2021
“Gotta Be the Shoes”
Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-17 / Ephesians 6:10-18
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

I ran the Philadelphia Marathon, way, way back in the year of our Lord, 2000.

Remember that crazy year? I was not a runner then, and I am not a runner now, but for some reason completing a marathon ended up on my bucket list.

I started training as part of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's *Team in Training* program, running and raising money for the cause in honor of my grandfather who died of leukemia. They provided the expertise for those of us who had no idea what we were doing or getting ourselves into – and that included, by the way, the two friends I started training with, both of whom dropped out after a couple of months. Somehow I kept at it, adding more and more miles to my routine every week that summer.

It's easy to get lost in a sea of advice and insider tips when you're preparing for your first (and in my case, only) marathon, but arguably the most important is to find the right shoes. I played a lot of sports growing up. My parents invested a lot in my athletic shoes over the years, but I never spent so much time researching and consulting about and reading reviews and trying on shoes as I did that year. People who work at running specialty stores are usually runners themselves, and let me tell you, they are more than happy to share their wisdom.

You're supposed to break a pair of shoes in, and if you start developing blisters or shin splints or some other foot or leg or back pain you've never in your life experienced, you start by blaming it on the shoes and try a different pair. And then repeat that cycle as needed. I just figured all the newfound pain I was experiencing was because I was desperately out of shape, and because it turns out 26.2 miles is really, really far when you're running!

In any case, as it turned out, I got lucky because I stuck with the same pair of shoes all the way through five months of training and the marathon itself. I guess I did my homework or something, and somehow, by the grace of God or unusually chilly

weather that early November morning or I don't know what – I finished. And then I promptly retired those shoes, and with them, my running career. Needless to say, running TWO marathons is not on my bucket list.

Some of you probably remember the Nike commercials that aired in the late 80s and early 90s, featuring Michael Jordan and his sidekick, Mars Blackmon – the Spike Lee-inspired and Spike Lee-portrayed character who originally appeared in Lee's first feature-length film, "She's Gotta Have It." This was the beginning of sneaker culture in basketball circles. And let me tell ya, as an impressionable teenager and aspiring basketball player myself, I was all about it. Picture Mars with his oversized glasses, his Brooklyn cycling cap, and a gold chain spelling out his name in ALL CAPS.

"Yo, Mars Blackmon here with my main man, Michael Jordan. Yo Mike, what made you the best player in the universe? Is it the vicious dunks?"

"No, Mars."

"Is it the haircut?"

"No, Mars."

"Is it the shoes?"

"No, Mars."

"Is it the extra long shorts?"

"No, Mars."

"It's the shoes then, right?"

"Naah."

"Is it the short socks?"

"No, Mars."

"Money, it's gotta be da shoes. Shoes. Shoes. Shoes. Shoes. You're sure it's not the shoes?"

"I'm sure, Mars."

"What about the shoes?"

"No, Mars."

"Money, it's gotta be da shoes!"

It's gotta be the shoes!

The scripture reading this morning, from Ephesians, brought to mind the sermon I preached my first Sunday back as Calvary's pastor – on July 4th. If you were around, you may recall the text from Ezekiel: "God said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when God spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet."

Using the extraordinary feats of the mountainous ibex as our visual aid, we considered the importance – spiritually speaking – of maintaining and reclaiming as needed, firm footing. And with it, a "ready" position. Confidence, determination, resilience.

The Ephesians text strikes a similar chord, with an instructive metaphor to drive the point home. The author of Ephesians – again, not likely the apostle Paul, as noted last week – shares in our reading this morning what is essentially a summary of the letter up to this point. They begin with the pronouncement in verse 10 to "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of (God's) power," and end with clear instruction in verse 18 to be ready: "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."

And in between, they introduce that instructive metaphor, the so-called "armor of God" – while all along the way emphasizing the importance of firm footing. Verse 11: "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to STAND against the wiles of the devil." Verse 13: "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." Verse 14: "STAND therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness."

And then, and then, we come to the shoes. It's gotta be the shoes!

Verse 15: "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." Now that is my kind of metaphor! We're all different. You know yourselves better than I do. I don't care what kind of shoes you put on your feet, I don't

need to micromanage that little detail, so long as they make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace! So long as they make you peacemakers!

But metaphorically speaking, why should SHOES matter in proclaiming the gospel of peace? Because more than anything else, they help you keep that firm footing that Ezekiel described. They help you hold your center. They help you stay on track and get where you ultimately mean to go. As Frederick Buechner suggests, "If you want to know who you really are as distinct from who you like to think you are, keep an eye on where your feet take you."

Peacemaking, like marathon running, is not for the faint of heart. Peacemaking, whether we're talking about cultivating peace within ourselves, or between individuals or groups, or within families or congregations or communities or neighborhoods, or within and between nations, is what Carol Lee Flinders calls "long-haul work." It requires Spirit-filled determination and resilience and endurance to stay on your feet, to get back on your feet again and again. And so it's especially important to find the right shoes. Money, it's gotta be the shoes!

This brief letter to the community in Ephesus, a community located in ancient Greece and under Roman occupation at the time, uses what would have been an all-too-familiar militaristic metaphor of armor to paint a vivid and decidedly nonviolent picture of what it looks like to be prepared, to be ready, for the long-haul work of making peace and ensuring justice. Again, building on Ezekiel's firm footing.

Here the old spiritual and protest song comes to mind, offering another useful metaphor: "We shall not, we shall not be moved. We shall not, we shall not be moved. Just like a tree that's planted by the water, we shall not be moved." The song itself inspired by scripture. From Jeremiah: "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is in the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit." And from the Psalms: "They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their

leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.” I rather prefer the tree metaphor myself.

In any case, if you've spent any length of time in the church, you've likely heard a sermon or two thoroughly breaking down the finer points of THIS metaphor, God's armor. Walking you through – point by point, and maybe even week by week as part of an extended sermon series – each aspect of God's armor: the BELT of truth, the BREASTPLATE of righteousness, the SHIELD of faith, the HELMET of salvation, and the SWORD of the Spirit.

Don't worry, I'm not gonna do that. It's clear enough, I think, that the militaristic metaphor gets turned on its head, as tends to happen with gospel truth. Amen! The metaphor compels us to take our preparation and our work seriously, serious as war, but the individual pieces of God's armor are primarily and profoundly defensive in nature. Intended to protect us from whatever threatens to distract or disillusion or derail us from the path of God's love, God's peace, God's way – for ourselves and each other.

It's different for each of us, of course. What is it for you? Maybe other gods of one sort or another, as with our reading from Joshua – “choose this day whom you will serve.” Maybe mental or emotional or physical pain or dis-ease or suffering. Maybe grief. Maybe fear. Maybe loneliness. Maybe insecurity. Maybe self-doubt or self-loathing. Maybe depression. Maybe cynicism. Maybe indifference. Maybe addiction. Maybe greed. Maybe narcissistic ambition. Maybe fatigue. Maybe stress. Maybe anxiety. Maybe jealousy. Maybe judgment. Maybe guilt. Maybe anger. Maybe rage. Maybe hatred. Whatever it is for you, for us, God's armor is intended to keep our hearts soft, our minds open. To help us stand firm, not in our own strength but in God's. In God's love, in God's peace, in God's way.

As Presbyterian pastor David Cameron puts it, the author of Ephesians “resorts to a common militaristic image of body armor that his audience would see on Roman soldiers daily, but in a nose-tweaking twist, he reinvents the image in a most non-militaristic way. He appropriates the common parts of armor – belt, breastplate, shield – but he assigns them uncommon values: truth, righteousness, faith. Consequently, the

armor, usually a symbol of self-reliance, is transformed into a symbol of utter dependence on God."

These armor parts are not intended for aggressive action. They are not intended for violence or harm. And in fact, as the shoes make clear, they are intended for peace. NON-violence.

The only equipment designed for attack is a sword, but even that is a "sword of the Spirit," and we're told that it's none other than the "word of God." And yes, God knows, as we all do, all too well, that the word of God has long been and continues to be confused and misused as a weapon, as a horrifically violent weapon, within and far beyond the Christian church. Against women, against pregnant women, against people of color, against those who are poor or homeless or hungry, against the LGBTQ community, against Jews and people of other faith traditions and practices. Against atheists. Against THEM!

But that is NOT the instruction here. The word of God, in a word, is love, as God is love. Jesus said so himself. Look it up.

Which brings us back to the need for the armor. God's armor, not ours. Verse 12 reminds us what we're up against, individually and collectively. That "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."

This is serious business. In the ongoing, long-haul work of justice and peace, of ensuring abundant life for all as we've considered in recent weeks, there will be resistance both political and spiritual. There is. As David Cameron also writes, "God's grace has enemies; God's justice has a bounty on its head; God's peace is marked for attempted demolition."

The kin-dom as God intends and as Jesus embodied in life and in death, is not a welcome vision for those who have consolidated power or privilege or entitlement or self-righteousness or wealth in its absence, and so whose power and privilege and

entitlement and wealth and self-righteousness depend on its suppression. White supremacy racism is a prime and particularly heinous example, grounded in self-fulfilling spiritual depravity and manifested in deep-seated, flesh-and-blood social structures. From slavery to Jim Crow to the New Jim Crow.

David Cameron again writes: "It is, in the end, all about power. Human distortions of power thrive in secrecy, in dissembling, in violence, and in the capacity to drive a wedge between groups by promoting fear and suspicion. But the strength of the Lord, the non-armor armor that ensures our victory, is transparency, mercy, peace and an absolute trust in the dynamic interplay of Spirit and Word."

It's gotta be the shoes, friends, it's gotta be the shoes of peace! Where God's Spirit and God's Word truly and fully intersect, there can ONLY be peace. There can ONLY be justice. There can ONLY be love. That is the END God desires and that we seek as people of faith, as followers of Jesus. The non-armor armor of God – highlighted by whatever shoes we need to wear on our feet along the way – is the MEANS for all of us, for all of creation, to get there. The means for us to be those strong-as-hell, fruit-bearing trees planted by the water, with leaves and lives that don't wither in the heat of an often unjust and broken world.

I close now with a prayer by Steve Garnaas-Holmes. It's written from an individual perspective, but I'm taking liberty to share it with you in the collective voice so you can hear it both ways. This is our work to do as individuals, this is our work to do together.

God, give (us) grace
to allow you to be (our) only defense.
(We) lay aside (our) capacity, (our) wisdom, (our) faith.
(We) surrender (our) distractions and obsessions,
(our) being comfortable, (our) being right.
Strip (us) of any defensiveness, anger,
dishonesty or superiority (we) cling to.
Give (us) courage to let down whatever shields (us)
from being one soul with another.

Let (us) be unprotected against the truth,
against the pain of the world,
the griefs hidden in (our) soul(s),

the terror of the dark places,
the heart of the heart before (us).

Let (us) be naked in the light
of being human and imperfect, of having a body.
Give (us) the power of powerlessness—
vulnerable, willing, sensitive and open.
Be (our) only shield, (our) only security.

Let love and truth keep (us) whole and alive,
your presence alone preserve (us),
your delight alone be (our) weapon and (our) strength,
(our) fortress, (our) life.
God of Love, your light is (our) armor.

May it be so.