

When I was in the fourth grade, I signed up full contact football. On the very first day of practice, I was dressed and ready hours before it was time to go. I had on my helmet, shoulder pads, football pants, and cleats. I was ready. Or so I thought.

At practice, the time came for something called get-off drills. The coach, who happened to be my dad, lined us up with a partner, and then when he blew the whistle, we were supposed to fire off into each other just to get used to contact and the sound of the popping pads. Dad tried to line the kids up by size, and so he matched me up with Peter Cano. We may have been the same size, but most of my size came from cookies and milk, whereas Peter's size came from raw meat and pure meanness.

I got down in my stance across the line from Peter, the whistle blew, and the next thing I remember was a loud noise, a flash of light, and then looking up from my backside at the bright blue Texas sky, while Peter and my dad looked down at me from somewhere far up above.

After practice, I asked dad if we could stop by the sporting goods store. When he asked why, I said, "Look, if I'm going to play full contact football, I'm going to need a lot more pads!"

I've been told you play a little football here in Georgia, too. And whether you're a football fan or not, just about everywhere you look in this town, there are pictures and murals and

statues of Georgia Bulldog football legends. There's just no escaping it.

Our text for this morning comes to us a letter written to Christians living in the first century in the city of Ephesus. When the Ephesians looked around their city, they didn't see images of football heroes; they saw images of soldiers.

Ephesus was a major seaport and Roman colony in the modern-day nation of Turkey. In addition to being home to more than 50,000 people, the city's claim to fame was a huge statue of the Roman goddess Artemis, the goddess of the hunt. Everywhere you looked in Ephesus, you were sure to see someone carrying a sword or dagger or shield or helmet or quiver full of arrows. Athens, Georgia may be a football town, but first-century Ephesus was a military town.

The first century after Jesus death and resurrection was referred to as a time called the Pax Romana, a time when the Roman Empire was reaching the apex of its military, economic, and political power. The saying was that the sun never set on the Roman Empire, because Roman territory stretched all the way from the British Isles to the Indian subcontinent. On ancient Roman maps, the Mediterranean basin was simply labeled, "Our Sea."

The Roman Empire achieved control over such a wide swath of the known world primarily through military dominance. Pax Romana literally

means “Roman Peace,” but it was peace achieved with the point of a spear.

And so the writer of this letter knows that the small band of Christians living in Ephesus probably had to only look out their front door to see a Roman soldier, with his helmet shining in the sun, and the light bouncing off his breastplate, shield, and sword by his side. The Ephesians had only to look out the window to see the full armor of the empire, armor that had enabled the empire to control a great swath of the world’s territory up to that point in time.

But the writer of this letter admonishes his hearers to put on a different kind of armor. Not the helmet of steel, but of salvation. Not the breastplate of bronze, but of righteousness. Not the belt and shoes of leather, but of truth and peace. Not the shield of iron, but of faith.

The soldiers of the empire put on the full armor of the empire so that they might march off to conquer ever more territory. But the Ephesians are instructed to put on the full armor of God, and having done everything, stand firm. Four times in the passage, the Ephesians are ordered not to march, not to conquer, but simply to stand.

The contrast could not be clearer. The empire dominates and controls through steel and bronze and unbridled aggression. But the kingdom of God stands firm on truth and righteousness and faith.

Last Saturday morning, I had the privilege of listening to the statements of faith of ten remarkable young men and women who were completing confirmation and about to become members of this church in full communion. And I shared with them that as they move into their young adulthood, it will be harder for them to live out their discipleship in Jesus Christ than it was for many of us, because the world in which we live and move and have our being seems to favor the ways of the empire far more than it reflects the values of the kingdom.

Part of the confirmation process is about equipping young disciples – not just with the tools of the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed – but with the truth about salvation and righteousness and peace.

All of us need equipping for the struggle that is following Jesus in a broken world, because the letter to the Ephesians reminds us that ours is not ultimately a struggle with enemies of flesh and blood. Ours is a struggle with the powers and principalities, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Ours is a struggle with systems of domination and oppression that work against God’s will for the blessing of all the families of the earth, and with our own complicity with the work of those very systems.

And so we need to equip ourselves for that daily struggle. Because the struggle against the powers and principalities and spiritual forces of

darkness isn't being waged in Washington or Atlanta or in some far-off place. It's being waged in our classrooms. It's being waged in our offices. It's being waged in our homes. It's being waged in the spaces within our own hearts.

So, when you get ready for work or school tomorrow, don't just think about putting on your clothes or your uniform. Think about putting on the full armor of God. Not the armor of the empire of steel and iron and bronze, not the tools of domination and oppression, but the armor of God, made of truth and righteousness and peace.

It was late in the final game of the season, and we were leading by three touchdowns. Brad had a heart of gold, but hardly a speck of athletic ability, so he had spent most of the season riding the bench. But finally, with a few seconds left in the season, coach called his name, and he jumped to his feet and sprinted into the huddle, grinning from ear to ear.

And we all just started at him in disbelief. None of us had the heart to tell him. And a few seconds later, coach started hollering his name from the sidelines, screaming at him to get off the field and back onto the bench.

You see, in his excitement about finally having his name called, Brad had left his helmet behind on the sideline.

You need to be equipped for this struggle. You need to think consciously about it every day.

There is a word of comfort in the text. Once you've equipped yourself, all you have to do is stand. You don't have to march off to fight the empire in some far-off never-ending war. All you have to do is be God's person in and for the world, right where you are. All you have to do is be a bearer of truth, a spokesperson for righteousness, an agent of peace. All you have to do is resist the systems of domination and oppression that work against God's intention of the blessing of all the families of the earth. And having done everything, stand firm.

And remember, we are in this together, and together, we carry the shield of faith. For a Roman soldier, the shield wasn't just for his own personal protection. When under attack from flaming arrows, the soldiers would close ranks and line up their shields together, and by holding them this way, they were able to withstand the attacks of flaming arrows as a unit.

Too often, I fear, we've been told that faith should be a private matter. And yes, there is a personal aspect to faith in Jesus Christ. But it's also a public enterprise, and it's something that Christ commands us to do together. Ultimately, it's not my faith, it's not your faith – it's the faith of the church.

And so, as we go out into the world again today, as we engage yet again in this cosmic struggle with the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, as we battle our own personal complicity and sin, let us remember that

the church is far bigger than those of us gathered here on a Sunday morning.

The church is not a building. The church is not a steeple. The church is not a resting place. The church is a people. I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together. All who follow Jesus, all around the world, yes, we're the church together.

Though your shield of faith may seem small when held up against the flaming arrows of the evil one, when we line up shoulder to shoulder in this thing called the church, though the gates of hell itself may come against us, we shall not yield.

Thanks be to God. Amen.