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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X33
Evensong 18 (Readings for Sunday Proper 16B)
Thursday 31 August 2017

Joshua 24:1-2a
Ps 34:15-22, 14-18
Ephesians 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

Football Armor

"Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Ephesians 6).

We have a three-year cycle for Sunday readings. That means we listened to the exact same readings in 2017, 2014, 2011, 2008, 2005, 2002, etc. Like me you probably often don't really hear the readings. Perhaps they go over your head, or you are not really paying attention, or you have a hard time feeling the emotions describe by the words.

But at other times they sink so deeply into our consciousness that they become part of us. This reading about the armor of God has this meaning to me. I remember exactly where I was when I first really heard it.

It was a ferociously hot August day and I was playing high school football. Back then we didn't know how dangerous concussions were, but we fully understood that what we were doing was risky. We knew that a serious injury could change the course of our life, maybe even end it. It felt like going into battle.

Our helmet, shoulder pads, thigh and knee pads, the pads on my forearms that made it possible for me strike hard – these protected us. We respected this truth. As we got changed in the locker room we knew that the equipment was one thing that stood between us and serious injury.

That's why this list of armor, which you may have passed over without thinking, really meant something to me as a teenager. Life is dangerous. The stakes are high. The world can be a kind of battlefield.

In the same way that you wouldn't take the field for a kickoff without a helmet or shoulder pads, you cannot neglect any part of the whole armor of God. Let me remind you what this entails. There is the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes for proclaiming the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit which is the word of God.

Behind all this lies the idea that a life without truth or righteousness, or for that matter the word of God, is a vulnerable life. When we build our existence on lies, when we ignore what is right, when we neglect to nurture our faith, we put ourselves at risk.

Our frame of mind, the way we look at things can, endanger us. Our lives are morally hazardous. You could join a group bullying a kid here at school in a way that could harm that person forever. The lie you tell on the job could have disastrous effects.

Last night in the newspaper I read about the ESPN sports commentator Ed Cunningham.¹ He is a former pro football player whose college team won the Rose Bowl in his senior year. Cunningham knows that he has one of the most desirable jobs of anyone in America. He does his work well. He is famous on TV. And yet he recently resigned.

Cunningham loves football but he felt that he had to speak the truth about the damage it is causing to players. He could no longer just go along with things that he recognized were wrong. His friends were suffering, taking their own lives, their bodies are damaged and he knew that he had to do something about it.

This is what is at stake when we put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith. At times it may be hard for others to understand you. You may have to give up something that you love. People may not like you for it.

But making these decisions is ultimately what protects us from the real danger, that we can lose our self. Through unkindness and dishonesty we can lose track of who we are. We easily can become exactly what we hate.

When you leave this holy place today you will go back out onto the battlefield. As we did in high school football I pray that these words may become part of you too. I pray that you will respect your equipment and take care of it. I pray that you will cling to the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness and the shield of faith. For in Paul's words, "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but... against the spiritual forces of evil." So, "keep alert and always persevere... make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 6).

¹ John Branch, "ESPN Football Analyst Walks Away, Disturbed by Brain Trauma on Field," *The New York Times*, 30 August 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/30/sports/espn-ed-cunningham-football-concussions.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad&r=0>