

Sermon for September 11, 2016 – “Vulnerable”

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C – Texts: 2 Cor. 4:1, 5-11, 16-18; Eph. 6:13-18

The Feast of Booths or Tabernacles is a Biblical week-long holiday that will be begin this year on October 17th – just over a month away. As part of their celebration, the Jewish community will build “sukkot.” What’s a “sukkot”? Well, it’s the plural of the Hebrew word “sukkah.” What’s a “sukkah”? **That’s** a “sukkah.” (pointing to one the Pastor built) The word means ‘booth’ or ‘tabernacle.’ I’ve built one for us; to illustrate that a “sukkah” is just a fragile hut with a leafy roof – the most vulnerable of dwellings. It’s intended as a reminiscence of the type of fragile dwellings in which the ancient Israelites lived during their 40 years of wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. Throughout the holiday the sukkah becomes the primary living area of one’s home. All meals are eaten inside the sukkah and many sleep there as well. Vulnerable in **time** – in that it’s temporary – lasting only one week each year. Vulnerable in **space**, where its roof must be not only leafy but leaky – it lets in the starlight, and gusts of wind and rain. In the evening prayers, the Hebrew prayer to God is a pleading: “Ufros aleinu sukkat shlomkha.” (Pronounced: “Oof-rohs ah-lay-new shlow-mecca”) “Build your shelter of Shalom – of peace – over us.” Why a sukkah? Why does the prayer plead to God for a “sukkah of shalom” rather than God’s “tent” or “house” or “palace” or “fortress” of peace? Precisely **because** the sukkah is so vulnerable.

For much of our lives and throughout human history we try to achieve peace and safety by building with steel and concrete and toughness...Pyramids, Fortresses, Air raid shelters, Pentagons, World Trade Centers. Hardening what might be targets and, like Pharaoh who refused to free God’s people in the time of Moses, hardening our **hearts** against what is foreign to us. But the sukkah is there to remind us: We are, in truth, **all** vulnerable. If as Bob Dylan sang “a hard rain’s gonna fall”, it’s gonna fall on all of us. We Americans have felt vulnerable throughout our history. Remember the days of the Cold War? Yet as uncomfortable as we felt back then no harm came to us. But, 15 years ago today, the ancient truth came home: We all live in a sukkah, a vulnerable place. Not only the targets of attack but also the instruments of attack were among our proudest possessions: sleek transcontinental airliners. They availed us nothing. Worse than nothing. Nothing could shield us. Not the greatest oceans. Not the mightiest buildings of steel and concrete. Not even the most powerful weapons. **Nothing...** We learned that there are only thin walls and leaky roofs between us. We learned just how vulnerable we are.

The dictionary defines vulnerability as the capability of or susceptibility to being wounded or hurt, of being open to physical assault, being difficult to defend. The events of September 11, 2001, revealed our vulnerability like never before. We remember the attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the United Airlines Flight 93 that crashed in Shanks Ville, PA. We remember how our nation’s sense of strength and security were shattered. It seems that we’ve felt more exposed and vulnerable ever since. If you live in places like Boston, San Bernardino, Orlando, Charleston, SC, or even Pike County, Ohio, no place seems safe anymore. It also seems that the capture and/or killing of many of those behind the attacks, including Osama Bin Laden, has done little to ease those feelings. Thus, we live in difficult times. A time of anxiety. A time of crises and disasters both natural **and** man-made. Everything’s less secure. The future most of all.

Nothing seems to make much sense anymore and answers are fewer and farther between. And, rarely there for the asking. It seems that the more we search for truth and certainty, the more exposed and vulnerable we feel.

Fortunately, God is **still** with us. The truth is that God never left. But we've heard this before and so I wonder: Do we really believe it? Sometimes God seems so far away. But He is not. Indeed, nothing could be farther from the truth. John 11:35, in many translations, is the shortest verse in the bible. We find it in the story of the death of Lazarus. It reads, "**Jesus wept.**" Here we learn that although He knew the outcome and purpose for Lazarus' death, Jesus still identified with pain, His own and others. The implications are that we have a God who has walked on this earth and knows what it is like to feel the pain of loss. God does know and care about the pain we feel. God knows what it's like to lose a loved one. God knows the pain and loneliness that accompanies that loss. God may not reverse the tragedies in our lives, He may not remove feelings of vulnerability as we'd like Him to but He's always there to help us come to terms with it and to comfort and support us in that vulnerability.

It's been said that God is far more concerned with our character than He is with our comfort. His plan is to perfect us, not pamper us. It's why He allows all kinds of character-building circumstances which largely occur due to our own bad choices or those of others, but is with us through them all. The Apostle Paul knew this. Paul was no stranger to suffering. He was, as he puts it in our first reading, "afflicted in every way." He tells us God sustained him through it all giving him the spiritual strength to endure. But Paul makes it clear that this extraordinary power is God's alone. It doesn't come from within us. And, like Paul, God gives us spiritual resources to persevere, to fight the good fight, to finish the race. Therefore, we also like Paul do not lose heart. Our inner nature too is being renewed day by day.

Paul also, as we heard in our second reading, presents a powerful image for God's protection and resources. A reminder that our struggle is more spiritual than physical. Using the image of Roman armor, he illustrates the spiritual truth that God has given us a "spiritual armor." Armor that protects us and helps us to endure. Armor that sustains us in times of vulnerability and exposure.

First, is the belt of truth. In times of vulnerability, we must speak the truth, doing so in love. How many times have we gone to great lengths to avoid the truth? How many times have we done so fearing it will hurt either ourselves or someone else only to find that the lie has ended up causing far more damage? The fact of the matter is that the truth, as John's gospel tells us, will indeed set us free.

Next, we're to put on the "breastplate of righteousness." A breastplate protects what? The heart. Guarding our hearts relates to the relationships we have with God and our neighbor, those around us. Left unprotected, subject as they are to words or actions meant to inflict pain, our hearts may become broken and broken hearts often become hardened hearts. God wants our hearts to remain soft. Especially toward Him and to others so that forgiveness is possible. Forgiveness for ourselves and others. A forgiveness that comes from a heart for God.

Third, are the shoes of readiness and peace of the gospel. In order to understand this, consider what our feet do. In battle, your feet are your foundation and your transportation from one place to another. By making the gospel our foundation we have a solid place upon which to make a stand and which we must always be ready to do.

Fourth, is the shield of faith. Shields came in two sizes back then, short and long. This means that we're to have faith in God both now and in the future. Faith means trusting fully in God. Trusting in the love that was made plain on the cross. Knowing that God will never abandon us.

Fifth, is the helmet of salvation. The helmet of salvation is the protection of our minds. The knowledge that our salvation has been bought and paid for. Secure in that knowledge, we have the courage to continue. Not only to ask God for His forgiveness but to also believe that we're indeed forgiven.

The sixth and final piece is the Sword of the Spirit. Which is the Word of God, Holy Scripture. Unlike the other pieces that we've described, which are mainly for protection, the sword is the only one that has the potential to serve in an offensive capacity. And, as we no doubt realize, scripture like a sword can also act to hurt others so we need to be careful how we use it. Lots of people – Christians, Jews and Muslim's alike – need to take that bit of advice to heart. Far too many misuse it. But scripture's not a weapon to prove that I'm right and you're wrong. Instead, God's Word is powerful enough to humble us, to convict us, to change our minds and hearts, to give us hope, to help and enable us to build community together. Far from passive, God's Word is **active**. It has the ability to transform those open to it.

This image of the whole armor of God shows us that we have great spiritual resources. That God's protection is much greater than any physical armor or weapon. Psalm 33 reminds us that: **“A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him...On those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield.”** What does this all tell us? It tells us that maybe we're not as vulnerable as we thought. It tells us that while we often assume that the church's mission is to be more moral and upright than the rest of the world. It's more important for us to be more **hopeful** than the rest of the world.

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing...The greatest gift Christians have to offer the world is our **example**. Our witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. The opportunity for others to see us in times of suffering and sadness, and see that **we** still have hope. The opportunity for others to see that we've put our trust in a God who won't let us down – no matter what.

Thanks be to God. Our help and our shield, Our strength and salvation, Our sukkah, Our shelter of peace.

Amen and amen.