

Opening

- In 1981, NBC began televising a police drama series that would become one of the most critically acclaimed series in television history and would become the precursor of numerous other shows of that genre.
 - o The series ran through the spring of 1987- seven seasons- and you can still catch it in re-runs sometimes, in the wee hours of the morning.
 - o If you haven’t guessed by now, I’m talking about the series called “Hill Street Blues.”
- Hill Street Blues starred Daniel J. Travanti as Captain Frank Furillo, and, until his death in 1984, co-starred Michael Conrad as Sergeant Phil Esterhaus.
 - o The setting for the series was the Hill Street station, which has been described as “a haven of controlled chaos in a crime-infested, racially torn ghetto”, located in some large, unnamed industrial city.
 - o Each episode depicted “a day in the life” on the Hill and each day began with an opening roll call.
 - All of the precinct patrol officers, undercover officers, and detectives would gather to answer as the roll was called, to receive any special assignments, to learn of any special concerns in the precinct, and to hear the latest news from around the Department.
 - o This early-morning ritual was always conducted by the desk sergeant, and during the time Michael Conrad played the role of Sgt. Esterhaus, he would always close the gathering with what became his trademark line
 - “Let’s be careful out there!”
- Sgt. Esterhaus knew that his officers would be going out on the street to face a myriad of potential problems, from routine domestic disturbances and panhandling to drug-dealing, burglaries, assaults, rapes, and murders.
 - o He also knew that his officers would be outfitted appropriately for the job that lay ahead of them—uniforms, badges, handcuffs, nightsticks, and hand guns.
 - o And that they would carry with them the authority of the city police charter.
 - But he also knew that they would be going in harm’s way.

- That for them, the world would often be a hostile place- for them, the days would be “evil.”
- And so as the morning meeting was coming to an end and the officers were all getting up to leave and the room was becoming boisterous, Sargent Esterhaus would grab everyone’s attention, quiet the room and issue a final command.
- “Let’s be careful out there!”, he would remind them.

Paul’s edict

- In a way, his reminder sums up the Apostle Paul’s message in today’s lesson from Ephesians.
 - Paul says, “Be careful then how you live...because the days are evil.”
 - And then later, he adds, “For 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.”
- These days, we may laugh at the idea of a universal evil force that is in opposition to God.
 - We likely discount the notion of an “evil one” and prefer to explain what is going on in the world as the consequences of individual and corporate choices.
 - We have tried so hard to adapt ourselves and our faith to the world we live in that it may be difficult for us to recognize when that world is out of bounds.
- Noted preacher and author William Willimon was a guest preacher at a church in Texas one Sunday morning.
 - There was a discussion period after the sermon, and the host pastor said to Willimon, “You seem to have such a negative view of the world. I believe that the world is a place of God’s love, that there is much that we have to learn from science, culture, and those outside the church.”
 - Willimon responded by suggesting that the pastor leave the church burglar alarm turned off to see how nice the world really is.
 - We have an alarm system, here at First Presbyterian.
 - And that fact underscores Willimon’s point- the world is filled with evil forces.
- If we think the Apostle Paul is maybe a little over-the-top when he describes the forces of evil at work in the world, we have only to go back into history and try to explain the horror of World War II and the Holocaust.

- We have only to try to explain our entanglement in Vietnam.
- We have only to look around at all of the violence taking place in the world today- war in the Middle East, terrorism around the globe, unrest in Nicaragua, nuclear threat in North Korea, gun violence in our own cities and neighborhoods.
 - Here in America, we have only to see the ravages of alcohol and drug abuse.
 - We have only to feel the effects of greed- individual and corporate.
 - We have only to admit the lingering evils of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnic origin and sexual orientation.
- We need only to take account of these things to realize that Paul’s description of the times- nearly two thousand years ago- still fits today.
- Like the police in Hill Street Blues, we are in a battle against evil- a battle for the soul of our world
 - And for our own souls, as well.

The armor of God

- This is where the whole armor of God comes in.
 - Paul says, “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”
 - Notice that Paul doesn’t advocate taking up arms against the enemy.
 - Rather, the armor and most of the weapons Paul goes on to describe are defensive in nature.
 - The only offensive weapon that Paul refers to is a sword, and even that sword is not a real weapon in a physical sense, but is a metaphor for the Word of God.
 - Paul is telling us that we have resources that can equip us to take a stand against these cultural forces that would destroy us and our faith.
 - Not with an **“in your face”** attack, but with a **“here we stand”** approach.
 - An approach in which we **clearly state what we believe** and then **live out that faith in our lives**.
 - These resources include truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, God’s Word, and salvation.
 - And all of these come through our faith in Jesus Christ.

- And they equip us to withstand the onslaughts of evil that are a part of this world.
- Let's be honest, simply living, isn't easy, is it?
 - Just living- facing the difficult decisions that most of us make every day.
 - Just dealing with the difficult people that we have to deal with.
 - Just being alive and keeping on track in a changing and confusing world.
 - That's hard.
- **So, let's be careful out there!**
 - For us as Christians, being careful means equipping ourselves with the whole armor of God
 - Just as the police officers in Hill Street Blues equipped themselves with the uniforms and equipment appropriate for facing crime in the streets, we too equip ourselves with the "whole" armor of God.
 - That's important.
 - And "out there" is where the evil is
 - "Out there" is where the battle is taking place.
 - And again, like the police officers in Hill Street Blues, "out there" is where we are called to be.
 - We are called to be "out there" where evil awaits.
- On September 15, 1963, four girls were killed when dynamite exploded outside the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.
 - In response to this tragedy, Dudley Randal wrote the poem, "The Ballad of Birmingham," which describes the event from the perspective of the mother of one of the victims.
- The poem tells how this mother refuses to allow her daughter to march against racism, for fear of the police, with their dogs and clubs, and hoses.
- The poem goes in part, like this:
 - "Mother dear, may I go downtown, instead of out to play,
 - And march the streets of Birmingham, In a Freedom March today?"
 -
 - "No, baby, no, you may not go, For the dogs are fierce and wild,
 - And clubs and hoses, guns and jails, Aren't good for a little child."

-
- “But, mother, I won’t be alone. Other children will go with me,
- And march the streets of Birmingham, To make our country free.”
-
- “No, baby, no, you may not go, For I fear those guns will fire.
- But you may go to church instead, And sing in the children’s choir.”
-
- These are chilling words, because we already know what will happen next.
- The poem continues
 - For when she heard the explosion, Her eyes grew wet and wild.
 - She raced through the streets of Birmingham, Calling for her child.
 -
 - She clawed through bits of glass and brick, Then lifted out a shoe.
 - “O, here’s the shoe my baby wore, But, baby, where are you?”
- **<PAUSE>**
- We can’t hide from evil, any more than we can hide from the world.
 - We can’t run away from evil, any more than we can run away from the world.
 - Scripture doesn’t tell us that there will be places in this world where innocent children can be perfectly safe- not even in churches.
 - Scripture doesn’t tell us that some Christians will be exempt from the life and death struggles between good and evil in this world because of their age, or for any other reason.
 - And Paul doesn’t try to pacify us by saying everything will be all right.
 - And all too often in this world, everything will not be all right.

Wrap it up

- What Paul does do is call us- as Christians- to become involved- to actively resist and protest against the evil powers of this world.
 - And he reminds us that we will never be in this struggle alone.
 - God will be with us and will equip us with what we need, to overcome our adversaries- faith, salvation, truth, peace, and the Word of God.
 - These are the gifts that we take into the world.

- These are the gifts that let us take a stand against evil.
- And so, for us this day and every day, “Let’s be careful out there.”
 - But let’s most definitely be “out there.”
- Amen.