Sunday, July 20, 1997
THE ARMOR OF GOD
Ephesians 6:10-17

The armies of Israel and Philistia were on opposite sides of the valley, testing and defying one another. Each morning, the giant Goliath would come out and shout, “Don’t you have any man among you who will come out and fight with me? If he is able to fight me and kill me, then we will be your servants, but if I win, then you will be our servants.” Instead of having the armies fight each other, Goliath suggested that the issue be settled by a one-on-one battle between two people. But each day, the army of Israel could find no one with enough courage to face Goliath. This had been going on for 40 days.

It was the custom in those days for the families of the soldiers to send food to their relatives in the army. So Jesse, who had his three eldest sons in the army, sent their young shepherd brother, David, with some corn and bread for his older brothers. Jesse also wanted David to bring back news about how the army and his sons were doing.

When David came to his brothers near the front line, it was the time of day when Goliath made his regular appearance. Seeing and hearing the challenge to the army of Israel, David asked two questions: “Who is this heathen Philistine that is defying the armies of God?” and “What’s the reward for the man who faces this giant and wins?” With these questions, David implied that he was willing to meet Goliath’s challenge.

When King Saul heard about David and his questions, he sent for him. Now David was more outspoken. He told the king, “Don’t let Goliath scare the entire army. I will go and fight this giant.” But Saul replied, “You are only a young man, inexperienced in the ways of war. How can you handle this giant Goliath?”

David, who was wise in the ways of the fields as a shepherd, said that he had once fought a bear and a lion while taking care of his father’s sheep. He said that he could certainly fight this heathen Philistine who had defied the armies of God. Furthermore, David said, “The Lord who delivered me from the lion and the bear will deliver me from this giant.”

In an attempt to help, King Saul offered David the king’s armor. They brought out the armor and put it on David’s shoulders, along with the king’s large sword. David put on the armor, but as he tried to move, he said, “I can’t fight with this armor. It’s too big and heavy and doesn’t fit. Furthermore, I’m not used to it. I’ve got to go without this kind of armor. I will use my own skills and weapons, the tools I’m familiar with.” So David took his shepherd’s staff, chose five smooth stones from the brook, took his sling, and went out to meet Goliath.

As he got near Goliath, the giant was insulted. He said to David, “Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks and stones? I’m going to feed your flesh to the birds.” David, however, put one of his stones in his sling, aimed for the giant’s head, hit him, and knocked him unconscious. He then took Goliath’s own sword and killed him. When the Philistine army saw that their champion was dead, they fled in fear.

This story of David and Goliath tells us several things about the armor we have — or don’t have — and how it can be used or misused.

First, it's a mistake to borrow and use someone else's armor. It most likely will not fit and will only hinder you. David knew this. Saul's armor wouldn't work for him. He had to go in his own strength and with his own integrity. He had to use the tools with which he was most familiar. We're not always as wise as David. Sometimes we try to borrow other people's armor for our own lives. We borrow all sorts of defenses that don't fit us and try to use them in our dealings with others.

Years ago, a best-selling book titled Winning Through Intimidation suggested that people should put on armor that makes them tough and win by intimidating others. The author was asking readers to be something they were not, and in the long run, it doesn't work. As David knew, it's better to fight without any armor at all than to try to use someone else's.

Secondly, this story tells us that too much armor, even our own, can ultimately be a burden and destroy us. We place our trust in our armor rather than in our own skills and ability. Consider Goliath, with heavy armor covering his body. The very armor he wore to defend himself allowed David, with his freedom of movement, flexibility of action, and simplicity, to conquer the giant with a sling shot. Too much armor can prove a hindrance to anyone.

Some people carry the heavy armor of defensiveness. They say, "Nobody is going to hurt me. I'll be tough as nails. I won't risk trusting anyone." So they drive potential friends away. They have so much armor that no one gets close to them. The more they try to defend themselves, the heavier their armor becomes. People with heavy armor are the loneliest people in the world.

Others carry the heavy armor of self-righteousness. They can never admit they're wrong, and they're certain that no one can win against them — especially not someone like David, who wore no visible armor.

Many years ago, when Ralph Nader was beginning his consumer advocacy, he was like David going against Goliath. His book Unsafe at Any Speed exposed the dangers of a particular car, the Corvair. The auto manufacturer, with all its armor of defensiveness, attacked Nader. They spied on him and tried to lure him into compromising situations. In the end, the company president had to publicly apologize for their actions.

How much better it would've been if the company had simply said, "The Corvair could be unsafe. We're going to test it carefully and fix it if necessary." Why is that so difficult for us to do as individuals and institutions?

In his book Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...and It's All Small Stuff, Richard Carlson writes in one chapter, "Just for fun, agree with criticism directed at you and watch it go away." He explains that so often, we treat criticism like an emergency and defend ourselves as if we're in a battle. But in truth, criticism is just someone's observation about us, our actions, or our thoughts, which may not match the vision we have of ourselves.

"When we react to criticism with a knee-jerk defensive response, it hurts. We feel attacked, and we need to defend ourselves or offer a counter-criticism. All this reaction takes an enormous amount of energy."

Carlson tells a story from his life: "One of the first times I consciously agreed with criticism was years ago when my wife said, 'Sometimes you talk too much.' I felt momentarily hurt but then agreed. I said, 'You're right, I do talk too much sometimes.' I discovered that in agreeing with

her, I could see she had a good point. What's more, my non-defensive reaction helped her relax, and a few minutes later, she said, 'You know, you're sure easy to talk to.' I doubt she would've said that if I'd become angry."

Victory often goes to those who are simple, creative, open, and flexible rather than those who hide behind heavy armor of defensiveness and self-righteousness. This is true for businesses, churches, and individuals.

There are many kinds of heavy armor we wear that weigh us down. For some, their work is their heavy armor.

Recently, I came across a story about a man whose work was his armor, and he worked himself to death. The obituary didn't say that, of course. It said he died of a coronary thrombosis. He was 51 years old and a senior vice president at his company. He worked six or seven days a week, often until late at night. His wife had given up competing with his work years ago. She said, "I've been missing him for years."

His work was his armor. Few people could get close to him, and it ultimately destroyed him.

Why do some of us need so much armor? We wear armor in proportion to our fear. The more afraid we are of life and people, the more armor we put on.

The third lesson from the story of David and Goliath is that the armor we wear must be the right kind and not a cover-up for fear or anything else.
David had the right kind of armor. He wasn't afraid to be himself. He had inner confidence and confidence in God. His ultimate armor was his faith and trust in God's goodness. That kind of armor doesn't weigh us down — it lifts us up. David said, "I am going out in the name of the Lord, with my integrity, my individuality, and my own unique gifts. I know who I am. I know my strengths and weaknesses." That's the kind of armor that really matters.

A person secure in themselves and in their trust in God is never brutal or brittle. It is the uncertain, unsure person who tries to be tough and mean because inwardly they are soft and afraid. They need armor as a cover-up.

The best armor of all is openness and trust. When we are open and trust others, we make fewer mistakes. Of course, trusting others is always a risk. But it's a risk either way. If you trust, you might get hurt. But if you don't trust, you'll get hurt for sure.

When you trust others, you help them emerge. When you don't trust them, you diminish them, and in diminishing them, you can create your own enemy.

You can't wear heavy armor and be trusting of others at the same time. Armor keeps people at a distance. It keeps us from loving relationships.

Our Christian faith calls us to be open and vulnerable, unfettered by fear and unchained by rigid ideologies. That is the armor of God. The letter to the Ephesians describes it this way: "Put on the whole armor of God, having girded your loins with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, having shod your feet with the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

In other words, we are to face life with courage and trust instead of aggression, revenge, and defensiveness. When we do that, obstacles like Goliath always fall on their face. Amen.