

# St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Thunder Bay

<http://standrewspres-tbay.ca> - Minister: Rev. Joyce Yanishewski

August 29, 2021

## Words of Welcome

I have been thinking about the phrase, "standing firm". I think of these words when I remember my mom and her decisions particularly if she and I were not seeing things from the same vantage point. She would stand firm in what she thought was the ways things should go. Standing firm in what you know and believe to be true is not necessarily a bad thing as long as we stay open to learning and changing when needed. The letter to the Ephesians call us to stand firm in our faith, which has come to be understood in particular ways throughout the generations. Unpacking this further may be of some help. As we do, we begin with a call to worship.

## Call to Worship

Holy God, you call us to worship.

**In your presence, we seek truth and forgiveness.  
and the grace to forgive one another.**

Holy God, you call us to worship you, heart, body, mind and soul.

**So, we gather to offer you our prayer and praise with joyful thanks.**

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## Hymn

*Stand up and bless the Lord*

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1. Stand up and bless the Lord;  
God's people now rejoice;  
stand up and bless the Lord your God  
with heart and soul and voice.
2. Though high above all praise,  
above all blessing high,  
who would not fear God's holy name,  
and praise and magnify?
3. Oh for the living flame  
from God's own altar brought,  
to touch our lips, our minds inspire,  
and wing to heaven our thought.
4. God is our strength and song;  
now is salvation ours.  
God's love in Christ we now proclaim  
with all our ransomed powers.
5. Stand up and bless the Lord;  
the Lord your God adore;  
stand up and bless God's glorious name  
henceforth forevermore.

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## Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Faithful God,

In the world of your creation, you made the seasons to change,  
the sun to shine and the rain to fall,

the vines to bear fruit and the fields to produce good things.  
You alone are our strength and security; you alone bring us rest and comfort.  
We turn to you as the source of all life, marvelling at your wisdom,  
seeking to learn your purpose for our lives.  
We offer you our praise and thanksgiving, for you are the God who made us,  
the Christ who mends us, and the Spirit who brings us life.

**Faithful God,  
even though we know you are the Source of our lives,  
we confess we often turn our backs on you.  
We speak and think in ways that deny our loyalty and love for you;  
we ignore our own needs and the needs of others.  
We harbour anger and say things that cause others pain.  
In your mercy, restore us to right relationships with you and with one another.**

God of Word and Wisdom, send your Spirit upon us today as we hear the scriptures read and interpreted. Help us be doers of your Word, not mere listeners, so that our lives reflect the truth we meet in Jesus Christ, your living Word. Amen.

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## **Assurance of Pardon**

While it is true that we have all sinned,  
it is a greater truth that we are forgiven through God's love in Jesus Christ.  
To all who humbly seek the mercy of God, I say,  
In Jesus Christ our sin is forgiven.  
Be at peace with God, with yourself, and with one another.

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We are about to hear the last reading in Ephesians in our summer series. This reading makes the most sense when taken in context, which is true about the whole of Ephesians. It is almost like one needs to give a warning before reading this scripture to not tune out as the language comes across strong and militaristic and has been used for many wrong purposes. As you hear the scripture, keep your heart and mind open about where it may lead us in understanding of our faith.

## **Scripture Reading Ephesians 6:10-20**

<sup>10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. <sup>11</sup>Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. <sup>14</sup>Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. <sup>15</sup>As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup>With all of these, take

the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup>Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

<sup>18</sup> Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. <sup>19</sup>Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup>for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

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The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

## **Message Standing Firm**

Onward, Christian soldiers! marching as to war,  
with the cross of Jesus going on before.

The words for this hymn were penned in 1865 in England and have been a favourite hymn for many over the decades. Personally, I have always struggled with the words, maybe because I have a vivid imagination, and maybe because I tend to be a more passive person and these words remind me of the many times Christianity has gone on the offensive. Christianity as we well know has often found itself a close partner with governments since Constantine made it the official religion of the Roman Empire in the year 313.

This hymn was written when England was busy colonizing and Canada was among those countries. Though colonization was a political agenda it always seems to include a component of bringing Christianity to whatever country the British Empire was busy bringing under its rule and influence, which in and of itself is not the terrible part. Learning about God's love and compassion for people is a gift. Still, in many places, how that faith was imparted was more battle like than the grace it is supposed to be.

One cannot talk about these things in our climate in Canada right now without acknowledging the truth that churches were involved in residential schools and that the loving presence of Christian community and leaders was not always the example and experience of Indigenous people. Partnering with the government whose agenda was to "kill the Indian in the child" meant the church was on the offensive in teaching about Christianity.

Sadly, the church has often been on the offensive when it comes to standing firm in our faith, taking that to mean a literal call to arms, like the battle speech of a General before the troops. A passage such as Ephesians 6 can play into that thinking. Yet this scripture is not so much about being on the offensive as it is about being on the defensive using the spiritual armour of God. Truth, righteousness – which is living in right relationship with God – a readiness to proclaim the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God as we know it in scripture, are all part of helping us stand firm in our faith and as

Christian community. What we are standing firm against are powers and authorities that would want to diminish our ability to worship and work in and as a faithful community of God who lovingly and compassionately care for people and all creation as beloved by God.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians assigns each of these qualities...faith, truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God, to the armour of a soldier ready to defend their government, nation, or leader. In a time of Roman occupation seeing a soldier would be common place and a ready illustration for a teacher. For most of us it seems a drastic example. Yet when one considers the number of nations that have been or are at war in our lived experience, or even the recent example of the storming of Capitol Hill in the U.S. just a few short months ago, one comes to realize that many people around the globe could easily see some parallels.

Taking the whole of Ephesians into consideration when determining what is being taught by this illustration of a soldier standing at the ready, we may do well to remember that to be Christian was counter cultural, which is very much what it means to be Christian in Canada today. Christians were a small minority and their understanding of one God, one faith, one Lord, and baptism, went completely against the belief in the many gods of the Roman and Greeks. This group of Christians were called to go beyond their comfort zones and their disagreements and find ways to love one another and tear down dividing walls...not in conflict but in the way of peace. As verse 15 says, "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace."

The letter is not so much about conquering the world in the name of Jesus as it is about being able to stand firm and confident in one's faith against those who would want to separate people of faith from one another or from the love and saving grace of God. We are not to be shy and self-conscious in sharing the life-giving truth that is available to all people but confident in our ability to share the words of life that we have experienced through our reading of scripture, being in community with other Christians, and our willingness to step out in faith to love and care for others with compassion and grace.

Our amour is that of the Holy Spirit given by God to strengthen and uphold us. It is not a "bring the gospel at all costs" kind of faith. Ours is a faith whose greatest weapon is prayer. It is why the request to "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication." Supplication meaning our prayers for others. As it says, "To that end keep alert and always persevere in the supplication for all the saints." Supplication, the instruction to prayer for others, hold others in prayer, is stated twice. If someone says they are praying for you, or if you request prayer, know that it is one of the most powerful and effective tools we have for touching, changing, guiding, and loving people into wholeness and standing firm in our faith.

It is interesting that the one who is writing and talking about this amour of God is himself an ambassador in chains. This is not someone in a powerful position and yet he asks for

prayers that he may declare boldly the mystery of the gospel, which is the saving, loving grace of God that we have in Christ. Remember that Christ died on a cross, not because he took up arms against the rulers and authorities, but because his words and actions threatened those in authority. His words were life-giving, proclaiming freedom and forgiveness, grace, and love.

This is our calling, to stand firm in our faith together in the community of the church, knowing that the world and what we experience in the world some would call evil, whether cosmic or because of human interaction through those who oppress and destroy. Our standing firm, our putting on of the whole armour of God, is to enable us to withstand that which would threaten to take away our faith and our hope, or that which would try to convince us that it promises life.

Think on the many distractions that sap the goodness and energy from our lives, from addictions to drugs and pornography, to making money or spending money. Think of the ways in which how we relate to our neighbour, family member, or co-worker frustrates us or makes us downright angry. Recall the ways you have reacted with hurtful words or actions, regarded another person or group of people as stupid because they disagree with your opinion. All of these are ways that evil or the “wiles of the devil” as found in this scripture reading, all of these ways are things that we are called to stand firm against. It is not just about the big things, it is about the everyday ways we are consumed, tempted, or act in ways that allow evil to wreak havoc in our lives or the lives of others, Christian or otherwise.

We are to stand firm in our understanding of God’s love for us, the work of Christ on the cross, and in prayer so that our lives declare boldly that God’s love, forgiveness, and grace is available to anyone who desires it. If we do not stand firm and share that transforming message with the world then others may miss out on what brings may bring wholeness and life to their living. So do not apologize for being a Christian, but with your prayers, and the prayers of all the Christian community, boldly speak the truth of God’s love, live in right relationship with God and others, proclaim the gospel of peace, knowing that your faith, the working out of our lives in God and the scriptures, all this armour is there to uphold and strengthen you and all of us together, through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### **Prayers of the People**

God whose Word created life,  
we give you thanks for the abundance we enjoy from earth’s goodness.  
Make us wise caretakers of the earth’s fragile balance,  
so vulnerable to drought and disaster.  
May your world become a place of abundance for all your creatures,  
for we know all our lives depend on you.

God of transforming love,

we are grateful to live in a land which is mostly peaceful,  
with leaders accountable for their decisions.

We pray for those who suffer from the burdens of racism, violence and greed  
in our communities and in many other nations.

Open hearts and minds to recognize abuse and exploitation,  
and help us build a common life where all people find dignity in their work,  
are rewarded fairly and respected fully.

God of vigilant care,  
thank you for the strength and comfort you offer us  
in times of sorrow and stress.

We pray for those who do not know security in their lives day by day,  
for those facing violence at home or on the streets,  
for the vulnerable who must depend on others for their care,  
and for those who experience unpredictable acts of hate or manipulation.  
Guide us to shape a society where violence is not tolerated,  
where the weak are protected,  
where the elderly are honoured for their experience,  
and children are cherished for their gifts.

God of all times and places,  
as the summer moves toward autumn,  
and activities must reorganize while the coronavirus is still present,  
we pray for families who face decisions about schooling,  
and churches and organizations trying to make wise choices.  
Equip us all with the wisdom we need to plan well,  
and act with understanding for those eager to get things going  
and for those anxious or reluctant to move too quickly.  
Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God who hears our desires even in the silence of our hearts,  
listen now as we name before you the people and situations on our minds today:

Receive all our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who taught us to pray  
together, saying:

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## **Lord's Prayer**

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver**

us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

### Invitation to make an offering

God generously provides all that is needed to be strong in the Lord.

Our offering often reflects the depth of our understanding of God's generosity and our gratitude for every gift we have received through God's faithfulness.

As we are people from different churches and places following this service.

I encourage each of you to present your offering to God this day to your church community in response to God's presence and generosity in your life.

If you consider St. Andrew's your church, regardless of where you live, would like to learn more about St. Andrew's, get involved in our ministry and work, or make a donation toward the life and ministry of St. Andrew's Presbyterian, in Thunder Bay visit our website at <http://standrewspres-tbay.ca> for more information or to connect with me.

### \*Hymn

*Be thou my vision*

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1. Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;  
naught be all else to me, save that Thou art;  
thou my best thought, by day or by night,  
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.
2. Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word;  
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;  
thou my great Father, thine own may I be;  
thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.
3. Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;  
be thou my armour and be thou my might;  
thou my soul's shelter and thou my high tower:  
raise thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.  
high King of heaven, my treasure thou art.
4. Riches I heed not, nor vain earthly praise,  
thou mine inheritance, through all my days:  
thou and thou only, the first in my heart,  
high King of heaven, my treasure thou art.
5. High King of heaven, when the battle is done,  
grant heaven's joy to me, O bright heaven's Sun!  
heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
still be my vision, O ruler of all.

Words: Irish, anonymous 8<sup>th</sup> century; translation Mary Byrne (1880-1931):  
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## **Benediction**

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of God's power.

Put on the whole armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm  
as you boldly proclaim the gospel of peace in word and deed.

The blessing of God, who delivers us,  
the grace of Christ, who sustains us,  
and the communion of the Spirit, who empowers us,  
be with you always.

Feasting on the Word Worship Companion: Liturgies for Year B, Volume 2 © 2015 Westminster John Knox Press. P134, 139.