In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

67Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?”
68Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life; 69and we have believed,
and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”
(John 6:67-68, RSV)

Thus love speaks. The best explanation I can come up with for these great words of Peter is that, when all is said and done, Peter and the rest of the twelve love Jesus. They are willing to stick with him even when they can no longer make sense of him. Love compels them. Love leads them to stay with Jesus.

Sometimes, when we are trying to thank someone for a gift, we say that we cherish the gift, not only because of what the gift is, but even more because of the hands from whom it comes. And so it is that Peter and the rest stay with Jesus. They do not stay because his words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood make sense to them. No. They stay because these words come from his lips. His strange words about flesh and blood come from Someone they trust, and so they mean to stick with him:

68Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life...”

With these words, Peter takes his stand. He is like Joshua in our Old Testament reading for today. Joshua knows that there are other gods in this world, other things we can worship and consider to be the most important thing in our lives. But as for Joshua, he means to serve the Lord. And so his great words to Israel go this way:

15And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” (Joshua 24:15, RSV)

He takes his stand: “... as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” Likewise with Peter. He takes his stand with Jesus. His heart is with Jesus, he
loves Jesus, he trust Jesus, and so he means to stay with Jesus even if he cannot understand everything in this world:

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life…”

It is as if Peter is helpless to turn away from Jesus. His heart just will not let him do it.

And I say that it was good that Peter and the other disciples stayed with Jesus: Because it can be a hard and spiritually dangerous world out there. It is better to stay by the side of Jesus. It is better to have him as our Good Shepherd. It is better to abide in him and he and us.

So it is that we come to my main text for this morning. It is a Bible passage about spiritual warfare and how we need the Lord's help. It is a passage about the whole armor of God. As I read the passage aloud please note that most of the equipment for a Christian is of a defensive nature. The passage goes this way:

11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. 14 Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; 16 besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. 17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:11-17, RSV)

Aha! You might think to yourself. That last one is not defensive. A sword is an offensive weapon.

But not necessarily. Look at this sword. It is a foam board sword Carol made for me for one of our Vacation Bible School children’s sermons. Our VBS Bible story for Wednesday was called “The friends of Jesus try to rescue him in the garden of Gethsemane.” It was the story of how Peter grabbed a sword and cut off the ear of a poor fellow named Malchus. Malchus was not a soldier or a guard. He was simply the slave of the high priest. Of all that crowd, with their clubs and torches and weapons, Peter chose to attack poor Malchus, an
unarmed man. So I took my sword and in slow motion pretended to cut off
the ear of little Eli in the VBS group. The children were all excited about that.

Well, that is using a sword in an offensive way. That is using the sword to
attack someone. Cutting off somebody’s ear is an aggressive thing to do. Glad
to say, in the case of Malchus, Jesus did not want the man to be hurt and so
Jesus touched the man and healed his ear.

But swords do not have to be used to attack. They can also be used
defensively, to block the blows of the enemy swords, without necessarily
attacking the enemy. Blocking the blows of the enemy sword might exhaust
the enemy, but it does not necessarily hurt the enemy.

And in any case notice that St. Paul is talking about a particular kind of
sword. He calls it “the sword of the Spirit,” and then he goes ahead to explain
that the sword of the Spirit is the word of God. We encounter that idea in
another part of the New Testament too. In Hebrews Chapter 4 we read that
“the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword”
(Hebrews 4:12, RSV). And so this sword in the whole armor of God turns out
to be a rather gentle sword. It is the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, and
it might well save a soul. Let it be so. May God help us that when we wield the
word of God, we do it in the hope that we might save others.

In Prayer at the Close of the Day – the prayer service called Compline –
there is a passage of Scripture that Vicar Caleb sometimes reads for us. It goes
this way:

Humble yourselves under God’s mighty hand and he will
lift you up in due time. Cast all your cares on him, for you
are his charge. Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the
devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone
to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith. (1 Peter 5:6-9a)

That prayer service - Compline - is on Sunday evenings at 8 o’clock here in
our church.

From today’s passage about spiritual warfare let us learn that one of our
chief weapons against that prowling devil is the word of God. It is the very
sword of the Spirit. Let us take our place with the word of God, as Peter took
his place with Jesus in our Gospel Lesson. In our contentions with the devil
and all those spirits that would mislead us or even destroy us, let us hasten to
the word of God for our great defense.

Let us consider another part of the whole armor of God. Let us consider
what St. Paul calls “the shield of faith.” My wife, Carol, pointed out to me that
in the ancient Roman armies, the soldiers would link their shields and
thereby seek protection behind a kind of wall of shields. The advantage of
standing side-by-side with fellow soldiers linking the shields together is that
the arrows and swords could not attack you in your sides or back. There was
a real benefit in the community of defense formed by the shields. So it is for you and me too. There is a benefit for us in standing side-by-side with brother and sister Christians in the church. Let us not try to contend with the devil all by ourselves. Let us take up the shield of faith, remembering that our fellow Christians can help us with that faith. They can know and remind us of the faith to help us along in our spiritual warfare.

Here is another piece of our whole armor of God: the “breastplate of righteousness.” In our contentions with those spiritual forces that would break us down, it is good for us to try to be righteous men and women. If we are mere pretenders, and if we are unrighteous people and awful sinners, it is going to be pretty hard for us to take a strong stand against the devil who particularly likes unrighteousness. So the breastplate of righteousness is part of our defense in spiritual conflict.

Notice the feet of the Christian soldier. St. Paul urges us to “shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace.” Again we see how gentle spiritual warfare is from the Christian’s point of view. Our big weapon is gentle. It is the “gospel of peace.” Maybe we can win others for Christ through the gospel of peace, through lifting up our good Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In the tales of King Arthur and the Round Table, the knights would go out on adventures. Sir Lancelot, for example, would put on his armor, grab his lance and sword, and actively seek out some wicked knight to attack and defeat. But that is not quite the picture of spiritual warfare that we get from St. Paul in this morning’s reading. St. Paul is not urging aggressive attack upon the enemy so much as he is trying to protect the soul of each Christian and to convert the enemy by way of the gospel of peace.

This peacefulness mirrors the peace of Christ himself. In that Gethsemane scene I mentioned earlier, it is not Jesus who grabs the sword and cuts off the ear of poor Malchus. Rather it is Peter who does that, and Jesus rebukes Peter for that violence. “Put up your sword,” Jesus says. It is not Jesus who summons twelve legions of angels to defend him there in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:53). Any one angel could have defeated that whole mob of people with their clubs and lanterns and weapons. But Jesus is not aggressive that way. Jesus does not contend by way of violence. Likewise for us. St. Paul urges us to put on the whole armor of God, and yet putting on that armor should leave us still quite a blessing on earth – a blessing to our friends and family, and perhaps even a blessing to people who might oppose us so far and do not yet know Jesus. May they come to know Jesus. May the full armor of God not only defend us in our spiritual warfare, but help us to win some people for Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever, Amen.