
Shoes, Helmets, and (Under) Armour: It's College Gameday

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh

Proper 16 – Year B

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. Ephesians 6:10–11

With phrases like, “be strong,” “put on the whole armor, shoes, and helmet,” and “grab your sword,” I almost felt today’s passage was too militant for a sermon. I was worried that the Roman battle metaphors wouldn’t be helpful or relevant. And then the Holy Spirit started moving in a different direction.

When you read this passage in our context... in late August... in Atlanta, Georgia... in the year 2015, the words describing the preparation for battle begin to take on a different meaning. We are living in a season where people are putting on armor, shoes, and helmets, because we are just two weeks away from the start of college football season! It is football time in the South!

And if you are new to the South, you need to know we do football big down here. We take it very seriously.

As a priest at the Cathedral, I pay attention to the football schedule because the games have an impact on our Sunday school and worship attendance. When doing premarital counseling, I will encourage the couple to check the football schedules before planning a fall wedding. Finally, during college football season I allocate twice as much time for pastoral care, because it is only a matter of time before the Georgia Bulldogs start unraveling.

Without a doubt, the Roman battle imagery in today’s epistle is recapitulated this time of year as students put on shoes, belts, helmets, and Under Armour.

Not only that, but I can think of two college football teams that have built their programs based on themes from today’s lesson.

If you travel up I-75, you will enter our boarder state to the North.

Many years ago there existed a college football team that was great. They had a Manning as a QB, and a year later they won the National Championship. But, they have spent the last decade struggling to win.

In 2013, the Tennessee Volunteers hired Coach Butch Jones to lead a distressed program. In one of his first interviews, Coach Jones said the only way forward was to rebuild the program brick by brick. That media latched onto the phrase “brick by brick” and it has become the team’s motto.

When we hear the words “stand firm” in today’s epistle, most of us think Paul is talking about holding on to our political or social positions. However, when Paul tells Christians to “stand firm,” he is talking about building a strong foundation.

It is very similar to what Jesus says in Matthew 7: “Don’t build your house on the sand, build it on a solid rock, and that foundation is Jesus Christ.

So, to the north is a college team that has lost its way, a team that is down and out, and their plan to turn things around involves standing firm and building a strong foundation.

Now, if you were to get in your car and get on I-20 westbound you would enter our border state to the west and eventually arrive in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Alabama has won three national championships under their coach, Nick Saban, who is known for a coaching method that he calls “the process.”

Now, I don’t have time to get into Coach Saban’s coaching philosophy, but I can say if you have ever watched an Alabama game, you know they live for the fourth quarter. At the beginning of the fourth quarter the players hold up four fingers. It is a sign they share with each other and the opposing team; it is a signal that one of their most important values is “perseverance.”

Whether you like the team or not, Coach Saban has achieved success by teaching his players about the importance of perseverance. Even when they are sitting at number one, the coach is still trying to teach them about the power of perseverance.

One of Paul’s messages in today’s epistle is that we must “always persevere.”

In this era of quick fixes and instant gratification, it is easy to forget about the importance of perseverance. Almost monthly the media reports that the Church is declining and dying; remember, one of our great virtues (for 2,000 years) is the power of perseverance.

Paul directs our attention to the saints, because they remind us what it means to live Christian lives grounded in determination and perseverance.

So, if football teams are using themes from today’s epistle, is there a particular theme we should use here at The Cathedral of St. Philip?

Well, last week Coach Candler (I mean Dean Candler) gave us a theme for the year—Koinonia—and it means community or fellowship.

Ironically, koinonia is a word that holds together all the themes mentioned in today’s epistle reading. When you participate in a group at the Cathedral of St. Philip, you experience koinonia.

In those groups you learn how to build a *strong foundation* in Christ. Our Cathedral groups are composed of saints who have taught me a thing or two about the power of *perseverance*. Our Cathedral groups are holy places to encounter *scripture*, music, and worship, and I can tell you from personal experience that the members will hold you in *prayer*.

Our Cathedral groups are called to mission; they will take you places in Atlanta and the world, where you experience what Paul calls “*the mystery of the gospel*.”

As we begin a new programmatic year, there is one word that holds together all those themes in today’s epistle, and that word is koinonia; it means community and fellowship.

If you haven’t experienced koinonia at the Cathedral, let me encourage you to put on your shoes, armor, and helmet and get in the game! AMEN.