

The Battle of the Bulge took place during World War II in December of 1944. The Allied invasion of Normandy, or D-Day, took place June of that same year. Up to that point, the Axis forces had exclusive control of continental Europe. Once the Allies took back the continent, they were confident that victory was inevitable. The Allies didn't expect Germany to launch the counteroffensive it did during the Battle of the Bulge.

Now, Paul writes to us **“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.”** We are called to stand, but we look around at churches in La Crosse. And we wonder, 1. (oops!) What does the Church even stand for?

In La Crosse, you'll find Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Baptist churches, Assembly of God, Methodist, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ congregations, Episcopal, non-denominational, and even four different flavors of Lutheran churches. That's just to name a few. Some churches wave rainbow flags. Some have female preachers. Some have altars in front, others look like theaters. Some baptize babies, others only baptize adults. Some have organs, others have praise bands. Some believe that the creation account in Genesis is literal, others think it's a myth. If you had a friend visiting who has never seen a church or stepped foot in one, how would you explain what we as Christians believe, when there's so much diversity? **How can we stand against the devil when the Church doesn't even seem to stand for anything?**

2. (ugh!) Armor of God or not, the Baptized will hardly stand! In this last installment of our three-part sermon series, Baptismal Life, we are focusing on the word “stand.” Paul encourages us saying, **“Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.”** But a whole lot of good this is doing, right? Anybody studying the trends can tell you that Christianity is declining in the West. There are more “non”-s today than there ever were. “Non”-s being those who mark no religious affiliation on surveys. Also, just as the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge sought to split the Allied forces by driving a wedge in their line, Satan seems to have split a million wedges in the Church. Is the Church standing its ground? It seems they're running scared.

It's a war of words. **The devil tries to deceive us causing the Baptized to doubt.** He tries to twist in little lies: “it doesn't matter if you're married, everybody's doing it.” “It doesn't matter what gender you have on your birth certificate, just as long as you love the other person.” Satan wants us to believe that the creation account can't possibly have happened as described in Genesis 1. The devil tries to convince us that salvation can't be a completely free

gift: we have to add works to seal the deal. Many of these exact lies are taught or tolerated in churches even in this very city, but don't believe the devil's lies. Stick to the sure Word of God. By it alone, we can stand in the evil day.

In many ways, D-Day marked the Allied victory over the Axis powers in Europe. The Allied invasion of Normandy, France on June 6, 1944 marked the beginning of the end for Germany. Once the Allies were able to break through the German defenses along the French coast and gain a foothold on the mainland, it was only a matter of time. It's not an exaggeration to say that World War II was won on D-Day.

So too, and to a greater degree, our victory was won on another D-day. God saw the world's sorry state. He saw the mess we made of the world. He didn't sit idly by and fiddle while Rome burned. He intervened. He Himself donned the full Armor of God. The Lord is the one who took action against “...**the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.**” He came to conquer sin, death, and the devil, not clad as a Roman soldier, but with the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation. With vengeance and zeal as his clothing.

He came not as a soldier, but as a servant. **Our God fought for us, and fights for us.** 3. (aha!) Christ already stood against the devil and won! All of Jesus' ministry led up to His D-Day. Sure, there were skirmishes here and there: a demon cast out, the sick healed, and the sinners forgiven. But all this reached its high point at the cross. Christ's crucifixion is our June 6, 1944. On the cross, Christ bore the brunt of Satan's rage. Christ was tortured, mocked, and tempted. The crowds cried, “If you're really God, save yourself!” In those words Satan tempted Jesus to run away, to not stand His ground. It's as though Satan were saying, “C'mon, you're going to die for these people? These ingrates? They're going to disobey you. They're going to shove your gift of forgiveness in your face. Your followers are going to split into a thousand little splinter sects. Christians are going to be a joke, and by the way, which Christians again? The Lutherans or the Baptists or the Catholics...? It's easy, Jesus, just come down from the cross, and this can all be over.”

But nonetheless, in the evil day, Jesus stood His ground. When He proclaimed, “**It is finished.**” He proclaimed victory! His suffering is finished. Our suffering is finished, in that victory cry! Our victory is His victory and on that D-Day. We need no longer fear the Devil and His might.

The Allies' decisive victory at Normandy really did mean they were caught off-guard at the Battle of the Bulge. The Battle of the Bulge was one of the most costly battles for American troops throughout all of WWII. Yet it was after the war was essentially won at D-day. And in the thick of the Battle of the Bulge, it

would have been easy to fold to Germany's might, and maybe consider an early surrender.

This is especially true for the 101st Airborne division. They were completely surrounded at Bastogne by German forces, and it was in the bitter cold of December. When General Anthony C McAuliffe, commander of the 101st Airborne, was given a chance to surrender, many of us would think it completely reasonable to do so. They were surrounded. They were cold. They were starving. The German offer was tempting. Here are a few excerpts from the note: "The fortune of the war is changing. This time the U.S.A. forces in and near Bastogne have been encircled by strong German armored units... There is only one possibility to save the encircled U.S.A. troops from total annihilation: that is the honorable surrender of the encircled town."

Does this sound familiar? Satan wants to try to give us an easy out, just as he did Jesus. He wants to scare us with the latest survey that says that churches are dying. He wants to convince us that we need to compromise God's Word to get people in the door. He wants to throw one more lie at us to make us think the truth must be false. He wants us to stand down from God's Word.

How did General McAuliffe respond to this offer of surrender? He said, "NUTS!" This was actually the formal reply he sent to the Germans, which took some explaining on the part of the American messengers. In other words, he said, "No way are we going to surrender!" The General knew that the tide was in the favor of the Allies. He knew the Battle of the Bulge was the last attack of a desperate enemy. The suffering was only going to last a little longer and then the cavalry was coming.

So today, God calls us to say "NUTS!" to the devil. We aren't going to surrender. We know the victory has been won on D-Day, namely, Christ's death and resurrection. Are the threats around us real? Yes. Do Christians around us surrender, giving up their faith for things that they think are more important? Yes. Do churches cave into the culture, going with the spirit of the times rather than the Holy Spirit? Yes.

But we can stand confidently. We know **WATER AND THE WORD GIVES US ALL WE NEED TO STAND AGAINST THE DEVIL.** Satan and His demonic host are trying their best to gain ground, thinking that that will somehow win them better terms of surrender, but that's not the case. In Christ, total victory has been won.

4. (whee!) Baptism dresses us in Christ which equips us to stand. In Baptism, Christ's armor with which he defeated Satan becomes our armor. We are able to resist the devil's schemes. **"Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all**

circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” God gives us everything we need in the Armor of God to stand against the devil. No matter what temptations and assaults the devil throws at the Church, we can say “NUTS!” to the devil, confident of our victory.

5. (yeah!) The Church stands by God's Word and Sacrament alone! We have been Baptized and dressed in the Armor of God. And we can stand confidently against the Devil's temptations. It's in God's Word alone that we stand, not leaning on our own understanding, not trusting the latest pop science or pop psychology. Even if every other church were to forsake the true teaching of God. We know the power lies in the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Let us remain faithful to this Word, even as Christ has baptized us into it. In Christ and in His sure Word, our victory is secure. Amen!