

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Ephesians 6:10-20 (NRSV)

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. [11] Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. [12] 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. [13] Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. [14] Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. [15] As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. [16] 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. [17] Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

[18] 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. [19] 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, [20] for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

A NEW UNIFORM

A teacher was singing the praises of her new principal. Under his leadership attendance had gone up, and discipline problems had gone down. The whole place had been transformed.

The reporter asked, "What made the difference?" And surprisingly the teacher answered, "I would say it was the uniforms." "Let me make sure I heard you correctly. Wearing uniforms transformed your school?"

"Yes, the new principal required our students to wear uniforms and the result was amazing. Overnight discipline problems vanished. The students loved their uniforms. So many of the tensions they felt because their parents could not afford to buy them the clothes that were in style vanished. They love their uniforms, and the school has changed."

Do you believe that? How could anything as superficial as a uniform transform a school?

And yet what we wear does have a big influence on how we feel about ourselves.

DRESS IS IMPORTANT

Have you ever seen the look in a woman's eye when she goes to a party and is wearing the exact same dress as someone else? Dress can be very important.

Sometimes my wife reminds me of the importance of proper dress. As we're about to go out the door she asks incredulously, "You're not going to wear that are you?" "What's wrong with my plaid shirt? I like it."

And then she tells me what's wrong, and I dutifully put on something more appropriate. For some of us, what we wear makes a big difference. They say that clothes don't make the man, but how we dress is often deemed to be important.

For instance, in the business world there is often a dress code. Some places require long sleeve dress shirts and a tie. And there are variations on that theme. Some require dress pants with a polo style shirt. I think they call that by the odd name of “dress casual.”

If you work for the police department or the fire department, you wear a certain uniform. I believe that when they put on that uniform they are reminded of their sworn duty to protect and serve the public.

I have a friend who is a Lutheran minister. We were talking one day about the fact that Lutheran ministers often wear a clergy shirt and a collar. He said, “It’s a uniform. I don’t have to worry what to wear each day. But, sometimes I think I’m changed by wearing it. I’m reminded by my dress every day of who I am and whose I am.”

GETTING DRESSED UP FOR JESUS

His comments reminded me of our lesson for today. Today’s lesson from Ephesians is about getting all dressed up for Jesus. It is about putting on a new set of clothes in order to become a better disciple of Christ.

Now on the face of it that sounds a bit superficial.

There is more to being a policeman than just putting on the uniform. There is more to being a minister than just wearing the collar. These and other professions require training and dedication.

Putting on the uniform is just the final step in the process. A person has to change on the inside in order to wear the uniform on the outside.

And surely that’s true when it comes to being a disciple of Christ. Surely being a Christian is more than just acting the part.

And yet that is what our lesson for today seems to suggest. Paul tells us to put on “the whole armor of God.” Elsewhere the apostle tells us that we ought to “put on Christ” just like we put on a new pair of pants. (Romans 13:14)

Is it that easy? Can we put on Christ like we put on a new suit or a new dress? Does that mean all we have to do is put on our Sunday best and try to look dull and religious?

There’s more to it than that of course. Putting on the clothes of faith is about changing our character. And that sounds like a very tall order doesn’t it? How can we change who we really are? Surely acting the role of a Christian won’t make us into one?

And yet I’ve found that sometimes when we act the role, when we do what faith requires, we find that we do indeed have faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer used to ask parishioners who came to him struggling with their faith, “Where have you been disobedient? What are you doing that you shouldn’t be doing? Change your behavior and you’ll find that your doubt will disappear.”

A MESSAGE FOR HARD TIMES

This has become a very important rule for me. I try to do what faith requires even though I don’t feel very faithful at the time. Indeed, some weeks it seems like “all heck is breaking loose.” And according to our lesson for today, that’s exactly what’s happening. Did you notice how Paul put it?

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:12) This, according to Paul is the reason we are to put on the whole armor of God. It is to help us “stand against the wiles of the devil.”

The image behind that word translated “stand” is that of a punch drunk fighter who manages to stay on his feet even though he is being pummeled by his adversary. I think I know what that feels like.

This has been a particularly bad week for many of us. I told one of my volunteers, “Sometimes I feel like I’m under attack.” Do you ever feel that way? Do you feel so overwhelmed by the problems that come your way that you are tempted to give up? Do you ever feel like a punch drunk boxer who is on his last legs?

In this passage Paul tells us, “Don’t give up and give in. Don’t turn your back and run. Resist that temptation, and prepare for spiritual battle. You are under attack. But, you have resources to deal with the crisis. Put on the armor of God and stand your ground.”

Now we have to be very careful when we use military imagery to describe the Christian faith. In order to resist evil we cannot resort to weapons of violence. We cannot become what we hate.

We cannot let anger and frustration control our lives. We cannot let our opponent dictate the terms of our opposition.

But, on the other hand Christians should not passively accept their fate either. Whether it is personal tragedy or national crisis, we believe that the real battle is waged in the hearts of men and women. The question in our time of trial is always this, “Are we going to succumb to the wiles of the devil or are we going to put on the armor of God?”

AN AMBASSADOR IN CHAINS

Some commentators suggest that Paul’s imagery in this passage may have been inspired by what was happening in his life when he wrote the letter to the Ephesians. You’ll remember that Paul was most likely imprisoned by the Romans on account of his proclamation of the gospel.

(Notice, for example, that in verse 20 of today’s lesson Paul refers to himself as an “ambassador in chains” for the gospel.)

Perhaps Paul was looking at his Roman guard as he wrote this letter. The guard represented all that was going wrong in Paul’s life. He represented the persecution and the abuse of power. He represented the might of Rome. Who could challenge such a mighty army? It looked like the battle belonged to the enemy.

But, Paul looked at that armor and said, “The power of Rome is no match for the power of God and God’s promises.” Paul knew from personal experience that the armor of God would bring him home safe and sound. The principalities and powers that sought to defeat him and cause him to despair would not win the day.

The armor of God is disarming. Military imagery is used, but it is used in a very non-militaristic way. Putting on the armor of God is not an act of war but a nonviolent act of resistance.

It is throwing a monkey wrench in a system biased toward negative emotions and hateful actions. It is a way of overcoming evil and despair without creating an even greater tragedy.

BELT OF TRUTH

What's that old saying, "The first casualty of war is truth?" Notice the first article of clothing that the Christian under attack is to don is the belt of truth. Jesus said that we shall know the truth and the truth shall set us free. What truth are we talking about in this case?

It is the truth about God.

The first and greatest temptation story in the Bible is the story of Adam and Eve. And what was the technique that the tempter used to bring down God's children? He caused them to doubt the goodness of God. The serpent asked,

"Did God *really* say not to eat of the tree?" And the tempter continued by saying in effect, "Be your own God. Do your own thing. Decide for yourselves what is right or wrong. It doesn't make any difference."

While Jesus was on trial, Pilate asked cynically, "What is truth?" That's a thoroughly modern question. Take away the hope of the gospel and all truth becomes relative.

If we do not believe that God cares, that God loves the world, why bother. As Job's wife told him in his despair, "Curse God and die."

When times get tough all of us are tempted to doubt the goodness of God and the truth of the gospel. We say to ourselves, "If God really loved me; he wouldn't let me go through this."

We fight that despair and cynicism by putting on the belt of truth, the truth of the gospel. We remind ourselves of some basic promises from the gospel, that God loves us that God forgives us and that God will be with us in this life and in the life to come.

No matter how often I have heard those promises, when I'm punch drunk from my defeats and feel under attack, those promises seem fresh and new. They form the foundation for a faith wardrobe.

BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

And then Paul encourages us to put on the breastplate of righteousness. At the heart of our protective armor is living that faith in the world.

The breastplate of righteousness guards our heart.

It is not enough to believe that God is loving and forgiving and gracious. We must respond to that grace by being gracious ourselves.

As I said before, if we have trouble believing the promises of God, perhaps we should put those promises into action.

Act as if you believed. Put on the breastplate of righteousness. Live a gracious life in order to discover God's grace.

Find the presence of Christ in service to the stranger.

SHOES OF PEACE

The next items we are called to put on are the shoes of peace. The shoes of the soldier of Christ are not the hard nailed boots of war but the sandals of peace. This phrase seems to be an allusion to Isaiah 52:7. That verse reads,

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

Our feet are not to move in the march to war. Instead, we are called to run and proclaim the good news of peace of earth and good will toward all.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace and Jesus calls us to defeat our enemy by loving him.

How many relationships would not be broken and how many wars could have been averted if only we had taken seriously the call of the Prince of Peace.

Violence can continue in a never ending cycle.

Someone must stop the downward spiral. Someone must finally have the courage to say,
"This is enough. I will not march in lockstep with a violent world. I will put on the sandals of peace.

I will introduce something new into the world.
I will run to bring the good news of peace and hope to a world that seems bent on destroying itself."

When we clothe ourselves in the armor of God, we must always put on the shoes of peace.

The apostle Paul also said that the "peace of God surpasses all understanding" and will "guard" our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 4:7)

In other words, when the tragedies of life threaten to overwhelm us, when we cannot find peace or hope, when there seems to be no way God provides a way.

God brings us peace.
It is not a peace we expect but a peace that is above us and beyond us.

This peace is not dependent upon circumstances but upon God's promises.

SHIELD OF FAITH

That quite naturally leads us to the next piece of clothing required to face the time of trial. It is the shield of faith. Paul said that the shield of faith would "quench the flaming arrows of the evil one."

In ancient days the Romans would carry a rather large shield. It would be covered with leather, and the leather would be soaked with water before the battle. In this way, the flaming arrows that would almost certainly come their way would be quenched.

In the same way, we defend ourselves from evil with the shield of faith, the simple trust that come what may God will provide. God will give us what we need. God will be our shield and our salvation. (Psalm 33:20)

The Bible defines faith as the “assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) Faith by definition strains beyond what we can know here and now. It seeks an understanding that is above and beyond us.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. The great poet, Maya Angelou recalls the struggles of her grandmother as she lived through the great depression. Maya admired her grandmother for her wisdom and strength. But, it was her faith that she remembers most.

The great depression was a difficult time for everyone, but especially so for a black woman in the South tending her crippled son and two grandchildren.

But, when faced with those mountainous burdens, Maya’s grandmother would clasp her hands behind her back; look up into the distant sky and say, “I will step out on the word of God.”

Maya wrote, “She would look like she could will herself into the heavens.”

THE HELMET OF SALVATION

But, faith is more than just willing ourselves to have hope. Faith is based upon the promise of salvation. The crowning piece of defensive armor according to Paul is the helmet of salvation.

The helmet protects what we value most, our heads. If you’re going to ride a motorcycle, for heaven’s sake wear a helmet. Protect your head.

And if you’re going to be a disciple of Jesus Christ wear the helmet of salvation.

What is salvation?

Simply put salvation is summarized in the declaration of pardon that we hear each week after the confession of sin,

“In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.” Some people think that liturgy is boring, that we shouldn’t repeat the same phrases each week. Maybe, but this is one part of the liturgy that we need to hear each week. Each week we need to put on the helmet of salvation and remember that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

In the movie, “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” the bride, Tula described her upbringing. She said that her mother served up lots of food with a heaping side dish of guilt!

The world quite often serves up a heaping side dish of guilt. Not only that we often partake of that dish on our own. We feel guilty, and our lives are less than they could be because of that.

But, Paul reminds us that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Don't let your life and your actions be defined by guilt. The blood of Christ bathes us in forgiveness and frees us to live a holy and just life.

Put on the helmet of salvation.

THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

Finally, Paul talks about the only offensive weapon. It is the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. We do not wield God's word as a way to denounce others and defeat our enemies.

The sword of God's word is a means of salvation for those who oppose us as well as for us.

God's word conquers through presenting the truth to everyone. In the Bible we read that God's word is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword." (Hebrews 4:12)

God's word is like a surgeon's scalpel that cuts away disease and brings about health.

And it is God's truth as found in the Bible that protects us from our enemies and from ourselves. God's Word is a means of grace.

God's Word gives us a sure hope when all around us is sinking sand.

In the Word the promises of God are put in writing. When we memorize those promises it gives us a life preserver to hold onto when the water starts to rise.

WEARING PROTECTIVE GEAR

A firefighter told of how it was important to wear all of their protective gear. But, he also admitted that sometimes firefighters took shortcuts and didn't wear everything they should.

One night the alarm sounded, and the call didn't seem too serious. But, on that night the two firefighters reminded each other to do the right thing, and they put on all their equipment.

All was well when they reached the scene. It did seem like a minor problem, a car had simply burst into flames after an accident. They were spraying water and foam on the car fire, and then the car exploded. Flaming debris flew in the men's faces.

But, because they were wearing all their equipment, neither one of them was hurt. Putting on their protective gear saved their lives.

In the same way we are called to suit up each day with the armor of the Lord. Tragedy never comes our way on a schedule. Out of the blue the flaming arrows threaten our life, and we need the protection that only God can give us.

Let us encourage one another to put on the protective gear that we need. Let us put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit.

The uniform really does make a difference.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH