



“Putting on the Armor”
Scripture – Ephesians 6:10-20
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, August 26, 2018

I need you to help me with today’s sermon. Please think about this question for a few seconds, and then I would like to hear your responses. I’m not looking for one correct response. As a follower of Jesus, what are some of the ways you express your faith?

Responses: sharing our faith with others, worshiping, carving out time for prayer, contributing to the church or another ministry that is helping people in need, visiting people who are lonely, driving people to doctor’s appointments, protesting injustice at home and abroad, caring for God’s creation...

What do you find are some of the foremost challenges to living faithfully? That is, what gets in the way, what sidetracks you, what obstacles present themselves?

Responses: too busy with other things, work, taking care of kids, it’s difficult to forgive someone who has hurt you, we swim in the sea of a secular society in which we are constantly tempted to buy our way to happiness and spend all of our money on ourselves rather than using some of it to benefit others, the never-ending flood of news about catastrophes and violence and political corruption makes us feel that we cannot make a difference, so why try...

Following the footsteps of Jesus is not easy. Living as the scriptures call us to live is often a struggle.

The New Testament lectionary reading for today comes from the end of the Letter to the Ephesians. Some scholars think it was written by the Apostle Paul when he was in prison very near the end of his life around the year 58 or 59. Others suggest that it was written by a disciple of Paul who wrote closer to the end of the first century. Either way, it was written when followers of Jesus were a minority and were being harassed and persecuted. Sometimes that meant being banned from certain jobs; Christians were treated as outcasts; sometimes they were physically abused; and sometimes they were killed.

The author of this letter tells Christians that being faithful demands tremendous strength and courage. They had to stand firm against their enemies, and their enemies were not simply flesh and blood human beings.

The author of this letter writes: “For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, 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.”

We post-moderns might be tempted to write off these words as pre-scientific babble derived from a primitive cosmology. While many of us may not believe, as ancients did, in a literal Devil who is responsible for the evil in the world, there are non-material powers that exert a strong influence over us, such as greed, lust, and anger. These powers can bend us into taking actions that hurt ourselves and hurt others. There are dark powers that lead to racism, homophobia, lying, addiction, terrorism, destruction of the planet... Today's scripture exhorts us to stand firm against these enemies by putting on the armor of God.

The military metaphor can be off-putting because of times in the past when the Church used such a metaphor to justify killing. People were killed because they were heretics – they disagreed with the official teaching of the church. During the Crusades, soldiers marching under the banner of Christ slaughtered Jews and Muslims, claiming that they were defeating the forces of evil. When Christians from Europe colonized new territory, indigenous people who would not convert were killed in the name of Christ. We have good reason to be wary of military metaphors.

However, it is clear that today's passage is not calling on us to do battle with people who do not think as we do. It is clearly focused on *spiritual warfare* – the need to battle nonmaterial forces that can destroy our souls.

The author describes six items that comprise the battle armor: the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shield of faith, helmet of salvation, shoes of peace, and sword of the Spirit.

We cannot simply grab the armor of God and dress ourselves with it in a moments' notice. The armor is created over time through discipline. We gradually thread the **belt of truth** through each loop on our pants as speaking the truth and seeking the truth become our habit. We tell the truth even when it is not easy; even when it means going against tremendous opposition. The ninth commandment says, "Do not bear false witness." In other words, tell the truth. Jesus says that he is the truth. And in 1st Corinthians 13, Paul writes, "Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth."

We are to put on the **breastplate of righteousness**. What does that mean? What comes to mind when you hear the word "righteousness?"

It is not *self-righteousness* which is to think of ourselves as morally superior to others. It is doing what is right, what is fair, what is just.

For the prophets, righteousness often means caring for the helpless in society – they specifically name the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed. Some of the prophets use the word righteousness in parallel with justice for emphasis. Thanks to The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the most well-known example comes from the prophet Amos: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Jesus said the righteous are those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and visit the lonely.

The **shield of faith**. When many people speak of faith, they often focus on specific beliefs about God. But I think faith is better understood as putting our trust in God. In the first century, a shield protected the soldier from arrows and swords. When we hold up our shield of faith – our trust in God – it helps us deflect those things that seek to wound and destroy us.

The **helmet of salvation** is to protect our head – especially our mind. Dark powers try to plant destructive ideas in our minds, such as:

truth is your unique version of the facts;
you should fear people of different races;
people who are hurting are not your concern.

When we seek salvation – that is healing and wholeness – we embrace the teachings of Jesus which help us fend off poisonous thoughts.

We have a belt, a breastplate, a shield, and a helmet. What sort of footwear should we select? A pair of Nikes so that we can be swift? A pair of rugged boots so that we can trek rough terrain? A pair of sandals so that we can bear the heat?

The author says to put on whatever style of **shoes** we want as long as they prompt you to proclaim the gospel of **peace**. When Jesus was born, the declaration by the angels was “Peace on earth, goodwill to all.” When Jesus was on the Mount of Beatitudes overlooking the Sea of Galilee, he said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” The apostle Paul wrote, “Pursue what makes for peace.”

The final piece of armor that our passage names is an offensive weapon – a sword. But it is not a sword that is used to harm, but to heal; not to strike a deathblow, but to strike a life blow. Our passage says that we are to “take the **sword of the Spirit**, which is the word of God.” The Gospel of John identifies the word of God with Jesus, who called on us to love one another.

The Reverend Fred Craddock was attending a conference in New York when he met a pastor who had no arms. He came into the world that way. At some point in their conversation the minister told about the time in his childhood when he learned to put on his own clothes. Since he had no arms, his mother always dressed him. But one day, she put his clothes on the floor in his bedroom and said, “Dress yourself.”

He protested, “I can’t dress myself. I don’t have any arms!”

She replied, “You must learn to dress yourself,” and she walked out of his room.

He said, “I kicked and screamed and yelled at the top of my lungs, “you don’t love me anymore! But it did no good. My mother did not come back to help me. Finally, I realized that if I were going to have any clothes on, I would have to do it myself.”

It took him two hours of struggling and cursing to get dressed. And he said, “It was not until later that I discovered that my mother was in the next room crying.”¹

It was torture leaving her son alone to struggle with his clothes, but she knew that if he did not learn to do it, he would never become stronger and more confident and able to conquer other challenges that would come his way.

To be a disciple – a disciplined follower of Jesus – we need to put on the full armor of God. If we fail to wear it, the dark powers of the world will pierce our flimsy armor and we will be seduced by the destructive powers of the world.

We must wrap around our waist the belt of truth. We must strap over our torso the breastplate of righteousness. We must tie on the shoes of peace. We must maintain a solid grasp of the shield of faith to deflect the flaming arrows that are aimed at taking us down. We must pull on the helmet of health and wholeness. And we must have buckled to our side the sword of God’s word. Clothed in the armor of God, we cannot be defeated.

NOTES

1. Mike Graves and Richard Ward, editors, *Craddock Stories*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), p.97.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

For your abiding presence, O God, we give thanks. You gather us from near and far, and surround us with your Spirit. You journey with us: beside us to offer support; before us to guide our footsteps; behind us to urge us onward.

We give thanks that you draw us close and claim us as your own. Companion God, help us to sense your Spirit moving among us, not only in this time we have set apart as sacred but in every ordinary moment of life. Open our eyes to glimpse your guiding hand in our lives, and open our hearts to respond to your Spirit's call. Sustain all of us, we pray, in the life of faith and help us to be faithful disciples.

God - we especially need your sustaining Spirit when we are weary and when our hearts are heavy ... When our world seems too broken; our communities too torn; our bodies too fragile. Fill us with your comfort and your peace, we pray.

We lift before you the concerns of our hearts, and long for your healing Spirit to descend upon every corner of our hurting world.

We pray for those dear to us who seek your healing in body, mind, or spirit. Strengthen those who are battling disease, and draw those who mourn into your loving embrace. Give hope to those in the depths of despair, and surround those overcome by worry with your peace.

We pray for communities near and far that are conflict-ridden, that are reeling from violence, that have been thrown into turmoil and are struggling to rebuild. Be present in the midst of chaos, as people from India to Hawaii reckon with rising waters that devastate neighborhoods and threaten lives. Be present in the midst of crisis, as people from Central America to the Middle East suffer the effects of hostility and political unrest.

Ever-Present God — who is above us to offer shelter, beneath us to uplift, within us to empower — keep us strong in you. Clothe us with compassion, equip us with courage, adorn us with wisdom, gird us with faith, and fill us with hope that we might proclaim the gospel of peace in every place that hungers for good news. Make us bold and send us out to embody your healing love and reconciling grace in all we do.

We lift this prayer in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ — the one who gave us words to pray:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.