

## **Ephesians 6:10-20**

Finally, 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. 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.

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. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 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. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 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. 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, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

### **“Buying Into the Required Uniform”**

Growing up in Arizona in the public school system I was able to dress how I wanted, within reason. We had no required uniform and no dress code to speak of as they do today. Still, I’ve worn plenty a uniform so far in life. Soccer, softball, dance and cheerleading all required uniforms. One of my first jobs was as a night receptionist in the service area of a large car dealership. I had to wear the standard polo shirt and long shorts provided by my employer. I found it personally stifling to wear a light pink polo shirt and ill fitting khaki shorts every evening. Then there was Salsa Brava, a delicious Mexican food restaurant in Flagstaff, where I served up margaritas and enchiladas during my undergraduate years. Required uniform: red polo top with Salsa Brava embroidered in the upper left corner; any black bottoms (shorts, pants, skirts); and black shoes (preferably sneakers with a serious grip as you didn’t want to skid and fall across the kitchen floor to the amusement of the kitchen staff). That Salsa Brava uniform made the decision of what to wear to work easy—it also took a beating of spilled salsa very well. Of all the uniforms I’ve worn in my life I like my Sunday clergy vestments best. Yet even in the dead winter I’m sweating under them. Geneva robes just don’t breathe!

At best I guess you could say I have a sort of love-hate relationship with wearing required uniforms. Maybe you’ve had to wear a uniform before and have a similar conflict between its practical nature and confining features? Or maybe your profession or life circumstances call upon you to dress in a certain way each day. Comfy clothes for parents running after young children on the weekend; business suits or business casual for office workers; walking shoes and rain gear for students in the South Campus Residence Halls of Geneseo; old sweats and shoes for the gardener playing in the mud; cycling gear for our own Dave Hurd’s long bicycling rides from Castile! Sometimes we wear a uniform without realizing it, other times we are well aware we’ve put on required attire.

There’s a uniform the Pauline school of theology was pretty insistent Christians wear at all times. It’s called “the whole armor of God” and it is *somewhat* invisible. Required uniform: belt of truth; breastplate of righteousness; whatever shoes will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace; a shield of faith to ward off the flaming arrows of the evil one; helmet of salvation; and lastly, the sword of the Spirit which is the

word of God. Thank goodness no one else sees this uniform! Imagine walking around Geneseo with the word “truth” glowing around your tummy and “righteousness” shining across your chest. People might think we are a bit stuck up. No, the strength of the “whole armor of God” is seen as it shines through the way we live our lives.

Why do we need this armor endorsed so adamantly 2000 years ago? A Theologian at Wabash College, Bill Placher wrote, “A hundred and fifty years ago, Soren Kierkegaard faced a perplexing problem in his native Denmark. How do you preach Christianity to a country full of people who scarcely understand it at all, but who think they are already Christians? In a non-Christian land, one could say, ‘Here is something new-let me tell you about Jesus Christ,’ but nearly all Danes would have responded, ‘Yes, yes, we know all about it. You see, our whole country is Christian.’ And yet, they hardly grasped the Christianity of the New Testament at all.” Kierkegaard knew that Christianity really involves suffering, sacrifice, advocacy for the weakest, facing conflict with love for the other because God loves them too.<sup>i</sup> Like the Danes 150 years ago, we buy into a Christianity taught by society, without studying the scriptures ourselves to hear Christ’s call for reconciliation, God’s message of shalom. We need the whole armor of God as our strength today and every day of our lives. When we forget God is our strength, we resort to using our own power and invoke God’s name as we do so; we use means of force which God has rejected as displayed though Jesus’ life and death and say we are doing God’s work as we destroy instead of build community. We need this uniform, but this uniform itches.

The writer of Ephesians gave early Christians a way to understand the shift of the Christian life as they turned from placing their security in the power structures of the time and instead began to believe in the strength of God to make all things new. People in Ancient Ephesus, a cosmopolitan city located in modern day Turkey, were used to seeing helmets and breastplates, swords and shields, the armor worn by their oppressors, Roman soldiers. The Christian was given a radically different required uniform! One preacher said about this text, “Apparently Paul did not expect following Jesus to be easy. He talks about the life of those in the church as if it’s going to be a kind of war.... Paul tells everyone to gear up for battle, but it is a different kind of battle. It is marked by truth -- which is the first casualty of war. Its advance is marked by salvation -- healing, wholeness, rather than body bags. Its gospel -- its good news, the headlines of the PR department -- is peace.”<sup>iii</sup>

Armor is defensive; weapons are offensive. We are called to put on the “armor of God.” The sword, the only part that could be considered offensive, represents the word of God, which leads to life, not death! This armor protects us for “our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the authorities, the rulers, the cosmic powers of this present darkness.”<sup>iiii</sup> We know God’s armor is powerful and dangerous to the authorities of this world, because those who use other armors interpret truth telling and the pursuit of peace and justice as weapons. Remember how before the nonviolent civil rights movement was accepted for what it was, nonviolence that shook up dark powers that used violence to repress, many asked the Southern Christian Leadership Coalition and Martin Luther King Jr. to tone it down, to let up for a few years? Equality and justice could wait they said, while injustice or the status quo was tolerated in the name of peace.

The whole armor of God is the manifestation of the strength of God’s power offered to us. God’s power has been fully revealed and offered. Nothing has been

withheld from our aid. This doesn't mean the journey will be comfortable. As monotheists, we believe there are spiritual forces that seek to have their way with our minds and hearts, bending them to the use of destructive power instead of God's power of reconciliation. Instead of battling with might as the Roman occupier did, Christians were to refuse to conform to any other uniform than the teachings of Jesus Christ. It's really quite subversive!

Buying into the required uniform sets the wearer free to stand firm in the midst of challenge. The battle Ephesians speaks of is primarily within our own hearts. Will we claim and wear the armor of God, or meet darkness with more darkness multiplying devastation?

At the ecumenical peace picnic last Sunday I was reminded through a speech of Mother Teresa's that one of the best ways to love God is to make peace with those closest to us. "What can we do to help you?" an envoy from the West asked Mother Teresa. "Go home and love your family, love your neighbor, find peace at home and it will spread." she replied. God's armor shields individuals fighting destructive forces: those who have trouble loving themselves, those in abusive situations; youth seeking to make it through the pitfalls of adolescence; those fighting addictions, depression or loneliness; those confronting their fear of death; those telling truths to others who don't want to hear. Putting on God's armor gives us the ability to flourish and live through any circumstances in life! It allows us to love our neighbor as God does.

Each of us has to come to an understanding of the difference between the call of Christ and the rhetoric of whatever society we live in, as a part of his or her spiritual journey. Douglas John Hall a theologian says, "Every Christian must in some sense become a theologian. ... There can be no more automatic Christianity" than there was in the early church.<sup>iv</sup> The early Christians knew being a believer in Christ would have the consequence of setting one in opposition to all the powers that thwart God's purpose for the world. We are mistaken if we believe that Christian faith means uncritical acceptance of any particular form of government, society, ideology, biblical interpretation and so on.

It matters whether you and I choose to buy into our required uniform, the whole armor of God, or not. Something is at stake. It is the mystery of the gospel and whether it is freely proclaimed. The required uniform is standard issue, a necessity for engaging the world in ways that seek life, wholeness and healing. We are invited into the victory of God over the principalities and powers of evil, to live according to Jesus' teachings because the Spirit empowers us to do so. If we cannot discern ways in which the Word of God calls us to differ from the society we live in, then we have chosen an alternative armor, human made, instead of relying in the whole armor of God.

Be strong in the strength of God's power! May our boldness, like Paul's, witness to the mystery of the Gospel through the living of our lives. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> William C. Placher, "Preaching the Gospel in Academy and Society" intro and page 1.

<sup>ii</sup> John Ortberg, "Roll Call" in *The Christian Century*, August 9, 2003, p. 16.

<sup>iii</sup> Ephesians 6:12.

<sup>iv</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Faith: Response in Relationship*.