

Sermon Title: Dressed for the Journey
Text: Ephesians 6:11-24

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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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It might be helpful, as we reach the end of this summer's walk through Ephesians, to take just a moment to remind ourselves of where we began, recalling of the *purpose* of this letter that has occupied us. You may remember that from the themes and images that run through the text, the best guess of scholars is that it was really written to be a sermon of sorts, and it was intended for times when this small, fledgling community took in new members through what we would now call the sacrament of Baptism. Remember, as well, that it was a call, not just to those new members, their robes still damp as they would most likely have been baptized by immersion in a nearby river, but to the congregation as a whole to commit and dedicate themselves to lives that would embody the faith which had claimed them.

There was, of course, no membership list for that church; no letters of transfer, no roll of baptized members, so we can't know for sure just who these Ephesians were in terms of their social class, or lifestyle. If the rest of Paul's letters are a reliable guide, we can surmise that they were a diverse and fractious group. The best guess is that this would not have been a collection of the city's movers and shakers. Christianity, in its early years had a decidedly counter-culture feel to it. It may well have been that proverbial club Groucho Marx spoke of—the one you wouldn't want to be part of if they would have *you* as a member.

That's significant in terms of these last sentences of the letter which we read this morning, because as you heard the images employed, if there was a soundtrack to the words it was probably the tune of "Onward Christian Soldiers". Put on the "belt of truth" (I remember "girdle" as a child, for some reason, and it always made *me* snicker.) Hold fast the *shield* of faith, to "quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one", don the "helmet of salvation, and the sword of truth." For a kid who grew up with parachuting GI Joe's and toy machine guns, it was almost too good to be true. Sign me up, 'cause I want to be a foot soldier in the army of God.

It took some years before it dawned on me that the only real experience these damp baptisees would have had of helmets and shields, of swords and armor, would have been on the hated Roman guard who reminded this former Greek colony that they were in essence an occupied territory. For a kid who grew up in the late fifties and early sixties there may not have been anything quite as romantic as the image of John Wayne leaping out of the foxhole, guns blazing, to lead his buddies to victory, but the rap on these early Christians was not that they were hot-headed fire brands ready to storm the gates, taking up their swords and shields, but the opposite: they were pacifists—refusniks who would not even participate in the mandatory conscription demanded by the Roman emperor.

If there were any image of battle gear that would have resonated with this crew it would have been David, who leaves Saul's armor behind as he sets out to face Goliath with only a slingshot and a prayer. If the point of this passage was to paint Paul as a sort of first century Knute Rockne, firing up the team to charge out on to the field and tear up the opponents it was an ill-chosen metaphor at best. Sorry, Arthur, but "Onward Christian Soldiers" will have to wait for another day.

What is *not* beyond Paul, or the followers who wrote in his name and tradition, however, was the use of *irony* to bring a point home, and as I've mulled the images we're served this morning, in the context of the rest of this letter, I feel far more comfortable with this understanding of our lesson. There was power in the waters through which these newest disciples had been drawn, and it was a power that could set the world on edge—that could altar the balances of the heavenlies, and reclaim a broken and hurting world. But it was a power that came into this world, not at the end of a Roman spear, but a power that was made manifest when it was nailed to a Roman cross.

So those who followed had to know that the weapons put in their hands would not be the ones that rested in the crossed arms of the centurions who guarded the corners. We may be dressed and fitted as Christians, but we're not "marching as to war." It's not just Paul. We're all ambassadors in chains, searching for a way of speaking that will make known the boldness of the mystery of the Gospel. And as Paul learned by wearing those chains, it is not a power found in our strength, but as he had written to the church in Corinth, it is a power that is perfected in our weakness, that sounds like *foolishness* and is rooted in the undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

What *is* it, then, that arms us and equips us as we move into this world as God's baptized? We're an odd army, to be sure, but listen for the joke, because it's the same one that slipped from the centurion who guarded the foot of that cross on which the power of God was shown to this world, holding the garment he'd won with a toss of the dice. He might have been a soldier in the mightiest army on the face of the earth, but the one who just breathed his last—he was most certainly the Messiah! So listen, not to the armor, but to that which lies beneath it: we've got truth, the Good News of peace, faith, salvation, and the healing Word of God: The gifts of God, for God's world.

That's quite a list, isn't it? Daunting, in its breadth and scope. They ring out loud as absolutes in a world that clings to relativity. There are certainly folk in this world who claim the truth, who insist that they hold the keys to salvation, but they tend to be the ones who make me a little uncomfortable. I prefer the more modest claims—we've got a pretty good thing going here. We can share your burden; help teach good things to your kids. Every now and then, we can make a difference. Truth, peace, faith, salvation, healing—don't those belong to God? Aren't we just the humble servants: let it be to me, O Lord, according to your word?

This closing chapter of Ephesians challenges me, because it suggests that we, as the church in our age, don't just sell ourselves short, we end up stalling the very power that sends us into the world. We don't have some general thoughts about what might work—we've been entrusted with Truth! We don't have strategies for avoiding conflict: we are the bearers of Peace. We don't just give folk a way to die comfortably. We know the road of salvation. We've been given what this world needs, and Ephesians makes me wonder if we don't spend too much time hiding it under a bushel because we don't want to show off, or because we're afraid it might blind those we meet, or maybe because we fear that we might be consumed in its light.

But it's just there that our hearts need to attend to the joke. Because I realize that the problem I have with those who are completely and utterly possessed of the Truth of Salvation for all the

world, be they Muslim, or Christian, or Jew, is that they also seem to think that this sword has been placed in their hand so that they can slay all who would challenge them. They think they're *Goliath*, when it's David who gets it. The sword of truth may well be placed in our hand, the helmet of salvation placed on our head, but we are the followers of the One who told his followers in the garden to put their swords away, because those who live by that sword will *die* by it as well.

We are followers of the Christ, and what we learn from him is that the power of *all* these gifts will be found, not as we gird ourselves up with them, and storm up the temple steps to claim what is rightly ours, but as we lay them aside—when our strength is *confirmed* in our *weakness*.

Step One is to recognize the real gifts that have been entrusted to us: to acknowledge in all humility—with fear and trembling Paul would put it elsewhere—that we are bearers of Truth, and Peace, of healing and salvation in a world that most desperately needs what we bring. But Step Two is just as important. We have to get the joke. We have to realize that the power that has been given to us is not something we can thrust upon this world by the might of our will. It's a power that will find its fulfillment when we pour ourselves out just as God in Christ poured himself out for us. It's not just the tools we've been given, but how we choose to *use* them that will make all the difference for us, and for our world.

So give us a picture of what you mean, Pastor. And I will, but I begin with a very sincere caveat. I know *nothing* about the people behind the story, and I assume that they are the most genuine, generous folk you could ever care to meet. In a world in which two thirds live in poverty while I enjoy such comfort, I have *no* stones to throw. But I couldn't help but wonder as I read yesterday's paper, and the *Home* section, with its feature article on a 13,000 square foot house that's been built here in Appleton. 13,000 square feet! Complete with a gymnasium, and a swimming pool, locker room and showers. The owners, so the article reported, declined to say how much they'd paid to have the place built, and I wouldn't guess. What I wondered was what it was *worth*? What would become of it when its owners tired of it?

Truthfully, I wish that family well in their new home. They earned the money and in this world we live in they're free to spend it as they wish. But I couldn't help but compare it to a job about two thirds the size that's under way across town, to carve six apartments out of a building that's seen years of good use, so that women and children have a place to begin putting their lives back together as they emerge from violence and abuse.

Here's the thing: like it or not, we've been given these gifts, these tools: truth, peace, faith, salvation, God's healing Word. We can pretend or minimize all we want, but that's what we've got. What God wants to know is what we're going to *do* with them. Will we, like Goliath, stomp out onto the battlefield, or like David, will we set aside the armor, and with a slingshot and a prayer—as ambassadors in chains—boldly proclaim God's salvation?

Let us pray.