

Date Preached	22-Aug-2021	Date Initiated	10-Aug-2021
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Prop 16, Yr B

" Put on the whole armor of God. "



Is there a certain item of clothing, or perhaps an accessory, that you never leave the house without? something that is an essential element of your wardrobe or your daily 'suiting up' for life? Queen Elizabeth, for example, almost never engages her public without a hat and a handbag. Long-time CBS News correspondent Charles Osgood always broadcast wearing a bow tie. I remember a period in my childhood when I wore a baseball cap all day, every day. Whenever I went for a haircut, the barber would moan and fuss over the permanent indentation the hat made in my bushy 1970s head-of-hair.

Following a custom that traces its origins to Jesus' commandment to "take up your cross and follow Me," many Christians make it a point to either wear or carry a cross with them, every day. Some like the closeness to Christ that it brings them. Some, in feeling the cross hanging about their neck or resting in their pocket, are reminded of their personal commitment to Jesus. To still others, it brings a certain sense of protection ... a constant reminder that Jesus, via the Holy Spirit, is never ↓ not with them ... wherever they are and whatever they're doing.

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It is this sense of personal protection ... of a constant defense ... that St Paul¹ plays on when he commends his correspondents, in today's epistle lesson, to "put on the whole armor of God." On one level, Paul—like almost everyone in pre-Modern times—firmly believes that capital-*E* Evil ... the Devil ... is an active, disrupting force in this world that one needs to be on guard against.² More concretely, the members of the nascent churches Paul writes to are, on account of their faith in Jesus, occasionally persecuted by the state; frequently maligned and harassed by other Jews who do not believe Jesus is the Messiah; and sometimes rejected by their synagogues and even their own families. Paul, therefore, urges them to gird themselves against all these dangers and difficulties—like a soldier donning armor before battle—so they may stand firm in their faith.

Now, we in twenty-first century America may not face the same existential challenges to our faith that Paul's audience did,³ but there are parallels, aren't there? We profess our faith and try to embody it in a culture that, on the one hand, belittles anything that cannot be scientifically proven;

¹ For a variety of reasons, modern scholars are almost unanimous in their conclusion that St Paul did not write the Letter to the Ephesians. In fact, there is strong doubt that whoever wrote did so specifically to the church in Ephesus, rather than more broadly to all the churches in Asia Minor. Nevertheless, for 'rhetorical (homiletical?) convenience,' I will speak of Paul as the author of today's epistle lesson.

² I'll hold for another time discussions (i) of the presence and nature of evil in this world (I have been helped greatly by the ideas of Karl Barth here); and (ii) of the idea of an "enchanted world"—and our modern loss of it—that the theologian Charles Taylor has suggested we would do well to explore ... if not re-gain.

³ This is not to say, however, that the religious persecution of Christians does not occur elsewhere in the world. (And it is also not to say that persecution of members of other religions does not take place *in this country*, either.)

and on the other, disparages an individual's acceptance of any institution's beliefs—including the Church's—as weak or gullible. As a people, we Americans live in an age of glut and excess ... of intentionally conspicuous consumption ... in which choosing to have *less* or give away *more* seems, to many, at least odd ... if not somehow threatening. Our Savior's injunctions to love and serve one another ... to seek to be the least of all ... meet no little societal scorn and cultural contempt. Unlike Paul's world, it may not be hard to *belong* to a church in this country ... but just like Paul's world, it is hard to *live out* the Church's faith, here.

Therefore, Paul tells us, we must prepare as if for battle ... suit up to contend with the constant critiques and self-confident dismissals we'll receive for pursuing the life Jesus has called us to. Like the soldier in a war zone or, sad to say, an ordinary police officer preparing to patrol her beat, we must habitually and thoroughly clothe ourselves in armor—the armor of God ... in the gifts Christ has given us.

- We must fasten on **truth**: Truth not in the sense of actual, objective correctness—if such a concept even still exists today—but of *constancy* and *reliability*. For Jesus never blinks, never abandons, never rejects. He is always right here, *wherever* we are.
- Put on **righteousness**: Not *self-righteousness*—a smug belief in one's personal correctitude—but the righteousness of Jesus on the Cross: the righteousness of our having been forgiven and saved ... of our being the undeserving recipients of God's extravagant grace.
- We are to proclaim **peace**: In the face of endemic violence and bitter hatreds and gross injustice, speak the vision of Jesus. Speak His constant bias for love over power; for service over status; **for** equity over plenty.
- Take up **faith**: In spite of the doubters, the nay-sayers and the hecklers, stand firm in the knowledge that the God we believe in is not only true ... but also the Truth: the beginning and the ending of everything that is.
- We must put on **salvation**: Not just our own—although, to be sure, we have been saved!—but the *entire world's* salvation. Jesus' coming established the Kingdom of God in this world: a new, redeemed order of all things. We must help God help the world struggle to see its existence.
- And finally, draw upon the **word of God**: In all things, Paul teaches, hearken back to the Good News of Christ: Yes, to His moral teachings and ethical examples ... but *also* to His being: to the very existence of God in human form ... Who has filled humanity with God's grace; saved it in God's mercy; and raised it to eternal life, which is God's ultimate destiny, for all.

Truth ... righteousness ... and peace. Faith ... salvation ... and the word of God. Such is the peaceful-but-firm ... the loving-but-insistent ... armor of God, in Christ. This armor will protect us from doubt, from insult, from castigation and even from oppression.

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But armor is effective only if we can wear it. How do we put on the armor of God in a routine, commonplace way ... as easily and consistently as a cross around our neck or in our pocket? I don't have a perfect answer, but I'd like to suggest a simple exercise: I think we might condense Paul's collection of helmets, shoes and belts into a short, memorable phrase:

Jesus is here. Jesus is love. Jesus, my Savior and my end.

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Try saying this five or ten times in a row ... two or three times a day ... for a several weeks. Learn how to 'suit up,' by picking up these pieces of armor ... handling and hefting them ... and joining them to yourself ... by repeating and memorizing them. Get comfortable in them.

And then, when this armor starts feeling right to you, look for opportunities to use it—directly. When you're hurt by harsh words or a harsher silence, say to yourself, "Jesus is here." When at a party someone delights in reminding you "religion is merely the opiate of the masses,"⁴ tell yourself "Jesus loves." When you're scorned or derided for showing mercy or being generous or loving the stranger, murmur "Jesus, my Savior." When you're accused of weakness or coddling or naiveté ... because you seek to eliminate want, erase prejudice or do justice ... let "Jesus, my end" resound in you, from head-top to toe-tip. The armor of God will withstand all these blows, for it is light and flexible, strong and thick. And all we need to know ... is how to put it on.



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⁴ This disparagement misconstrues Marx's original statement, which is far more sociologically nuanced (and even sympathetic).