

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Sunday August 26, 2018 16B  
Text: Ephesians 6:10-20  
Sermon: Clothed with Christ  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren

In Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow*, the main character who narrates his own story says, "Not all of the hymns could move me. I never liked "Onward Christian Soldiers" or "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Jesus' military career has never compelled my belief.

I have to admit that I feel a little bit like Jayber Crow about the aforementioned hymns, and I had a similar reaction to the epistle reading for today about the full armor of God. I tend to shy away from imagery of soldiering and warfare, becoming uncomfortable when the good news of Christ, who did not lead an army nor take up arms, gets mingled into the narrative of war and power.

However, as I looked more deeply at the passage from Ephesians, I began to realize that I was avoiding something worthwhile. A closer look was warranted.

One week in the fall of the year several years ago, I traveled to Holy Cross monastery near Old Mesilla for a clergy conference. It was a tough conference for a number of reasons, one of which was that the diocese was deeply divided over issues of human sexuality. There was plenty of tension, and the room was divided. We were being asked to listen to a mind-numbing lecture on the subject of the indelibility of the priesthood, a subject I'd never heard of and about which I was incredulous. It was all leading up to a conclusion from this scholar to argue that somehow women should not be ordained and neither should those of differing sexualities. So much for a relaxing and edifying clergy retreat.

In a break between listening to the indelibility scholar, I struck up a conversation with an aspirant visitor from Arizona. He had been denied postulancy in his home diocese and was trolling the Diocese of the Rio Grande hoping to convince our bishop of his merits. After talking for a little while, he decided that I was suspect and that he needed to confront me in the name of the Lord. What I remember most about this encounter was the intensity of a very tall man who was pointing his finger at my chest and then began talk-shouting his questions at me on the sidewalk. The one that I remember best was, "Are you a warrior for Christ? Are you ready for battle with the enemy?" Having grown up in a fundamentalist tradition, I was not

unaccustomed to questions of this nature nor to the evangelical fervor that often accompanied such inquisitions. However, I was a bit taken aback that it was happening at a clergy retreat in the middle of pecan orchards, cheesy catholic statuary and a soft drink machine just a few yards away. The conversation did not really go all that well. I was not answering his questions adequately, and I surely had failed the warrior-for-Christ litmus test before I had begun.

I must say that as the conversation progressed it degenerated into an aspiring clergy person asking me if I was actually a Christian, was I saved, washed in the blood of the lamb? Now, I've never really taken kindly to that line of questioning, and I found it irritating and offensive that not only was I having to listen to a mind-numbing talk about the indelibility of the priesthood hour after hour but now was being harangued by an aggressive Christian warrior at what was supposed to be a relaxing and renewing clergy retreat. Of course, if you've ever been in a situation like this there is actually nothing really good that you can say once you are believed to be deficient in the faith. I did, however, get one good lick in before I retreated back to the comfort of the lecture hall. I said, "I'm not sure if I would ever be able to answer all your questions adequately, but I will fall back on the words of Archbishop William Carey who, when asked if he was saved said this, 'I have been saved, I am being saved, and I hope to be saved.'" Thankfully I was saved from any further questioning.

A few years ago, I was standing in the nave of this church talking with another pastor of an evangelical church that wanted to rent our space to plant a new church close to Nob Hill. It didn't work out for a number of reasons but I still remember something that he said. He was talking about the need for the church to reach out into the surrounding neighborhood because in this culture of death people needed a word of hope; they needed the good news of Christ. The words "culture of death," struck me as true and descriptive of so much of our society. A society addicted to consuming, addicted to pleasure, focused on things over people, fearful of losing what they have, comfortable with violence and deep inequalities, eager to eliminate help for the most vulnerable, greedy beyond measure, and lonely for deep relationships and community but clueless about how to recover what they have lost.

I think that this pastor's phrase a "culture of death," is close to what the writer of Ephesians is talking about when he says,

*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.*

I think that the writer sees the spiritual forces that are constantly at work dividing people, sowing enmity and fear. The writer knows that the world is not a neutral place where everything moves toward goodness. He sees forces that create loneliness and despair. He sees crushing poverty and brutal aggression. He sees people being pushed under and cast aside by the empire. I remember listening to Madeline L Engle, the author of *A Wrinkle In Time*, describe evil as the great “It.” She did not want to personify evil or give evil personal characteristics because she understood the work of the evil one to be that of constantly dehumanizing and depersonalizing the world. The devil, from her perspective, was a powerful inhuman force that corrupts and destroys the beauty of the world and its inhabitants that God loves.

I think you know what the author is talking about. You have your own images and thoughts about “this present darkness and the spiritual forces or wickedness.”

But what is this armor of God that the author is talking about?

*Stand therefore, 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.*

**The belt of truth around your waist.** In these days when deep thinking, investigative research and reporting, scientific data, spiritual wisdom and so much more are sometimes cast aside as “fake news” by people in power, a belt of truth makes this biblical warrior that Paul is outfitting sound incredibly attractive and subversive.

**The breastplate of justice.** I take this to mean that those who are following God are to be concerned about doing the right thing even if it is difficult or costly or uncomfortable. I’m not sure that we are living in times that are more evil than others. There have always been people who want to prosper at the expense of others and benefit by destroying people and communities and environments. Justice

is complicated at times, to be sure, but seeking the common good and putting people's wellbeing ahead of profits and harm is key. It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting. It has been tried and found difficult, so it has mostly been left untried. Discerning what is just and lovely is a Christian practice that animates the heart of the church, and it is one of the reasons I'm so grateful to be a part of the community of faith. We may not always get it right, but we do care about justice and work for it and puzzle over it because deep down we serve and worship a God who we believe will eventually make things right.

**Shoes that will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.** Now there is nothing about this that sounds aggressive or violent. Wear shoes for peace. I love this idea. Buy shoes that make you want to make peace and proclaim it. Purchase peaceful shoes. Don't put on the boots of violence or the heels of hellfire. Put on the sandals of kindness, the loafers of love, the pumps of peace. In short, God's people should be prone toward peaceableness. What a concept! What would happen if our country had a Peace College instead of a War College? What if we were as serious about waging peace as we are at war? How do we marshal our resources, shape our culture, and guide our economy so that it is a peaceful one, one that shares prosperity, one that seeks harmony and cooperation instead of unfettered competition? Are churches raising up peacekeepers, inculcating the skills of non-violence and an imagination prone toward peaceableness? I have often heard, and I do believe, that those in the armed service are the most peace-loving people around as it is their lives on the line when there is conflict. This admonition from Paul seems to tell us that God's people are to be fierce lovers of peace because it is close to God's heart. Christians have not taken this instruction of Paul seriously enough throughout the ages.

There is of course more to the armor list: The shield of faith, helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit. I'm not sure that there is space in any one sermon to talk about all these wardrobe necessities.

**The helmet of salvation.** What do we mean by salvation? I like what Frederick Beuchner has to say about salvation.

*When you love somebody, it is no longer yourself who is the center of your own universe. It is the one you love who is. You forget yourself. You deny yourself. You give of yourself so that by all the rules of arithmetical logic there should be less of yourself than there was to start with. Only by a curious paradox there is more. You feel that at last you really are yourself.*

*The experience of salvation involves the same paradox. Jesus put it like this: "He who loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matt. 10:39).*

You give up your old self-seeking self for somebody you love and thereby become yourself at last. You must die with Christ so that you can rise with him, Paul says. It is what baptism is all about.

You do not love God so that, tit for tat, he will save you. To love God is to be saved. To love anybody is a significant step along the way.

You do not love God and live for him so you will go to Heaven. Whichever side of the grave you happen to be talking about, to love God and live for him is Heaven.

It is a gift not an achievement.

You can make yourself moral. You can make yourself religious. But you can't make yourself love.

"We love," John says, "Because God first loved us." (1 John 4; 19)

What I find interesting about all of this armor business is how hilariously subversive it all is. None of these items are what one would think of as necessary for militant action. Belt of Truth, Breastplate of Justice, Shoes for Peace, Shield of Faith, Helmet of Salvation, Sword of the Spirit. None of these items appeared on the armor list for the Roman legions. This is a list meant to challenge the powers and principalities in and of themselves. Paul is saying something like, if you, the people of God want to follow Jesus then you will have to get comfortable in the most unusual armor available. You are going to have to wear the strangest and most beautiful and most vulnerable uniform ever imagined. If we want to be warriors for Christ (Yikes, that phrase still makes me shudder), then you must clothe yourselves with Christ's suffering, humility, self-sacrifice, compassion and forgiveness. You must bear the strangest armor into the world if you want to help God heal the world. The normal tools of the empire - violence, force, coercion, privilege, greed, corruption, lies - will not work.

Paul's armor list is a call to love and life and being awake. He is telling us these are the things that will help you resist the corruption that the powers of this world are always trying to twist into us. These are the tools for resistance that the people of God need to bring real peace, salvation, and healing to the world around them. Paul is not addressing individuals here; he is addressing the entire body of Christ. He is reminding us that as a whole we are the place where the world encounters Jesus,

and it is Jesus who assaults the powers and principalities of this world. He is giving us a graphic description of what it means to put on Christ.

So how do we acquire this wardrobe as the people of God? I'm not sure that acquire is actually the right verb here. We are clothed with Christ as the people of God through our participation in the life of the church over time and in the many and various ways that the spirit works within us. One way to put it would be that through our life in the church and hopefully in our families we learn a truthful story, a story of God's loving purposes for all that God has made and of the gracious movements of salvation directed toward humankind.

We put on Christ, the full armor of God by paying close attention to the life, teaching and example of Christ and allowing ourselves to be shaped into his likeness. The Spirit uses all manner of things to shape us into a faithful and truthful people: music, prayer, scripture, preaching, teaching, confession, bible study, discussion, spiritual reading, retreats, meditation, spiritual direction, mentoring, and silence. The more we learn about the exemplars of the faith who have gone before us, whether they are the saints of old or those in the pew next to us, the more we are inspired to live out a life of faithfulness to Christ's ways. The more we allow the biblical story to become our story and become aware of how our story is a part of God's story of redemption, the more we become God's people in the world. The more we allow God's heart to shape our hearts, the more we know what righteousness looks like: to care for the widow and orphan, to welcome the stranger and the sojourner, to feed the hungry and to set free the oppressed, and the more deeply we become God's soldiers of peace.

We put on Christ by first going through the waters of baptism, where we die to our old self and are raised into a new life in Christ. We are nurtured and shaped by a community of faithful people throughout our life, learning the Christian story by heart, making the scriptures our own, being molded by worship and, for Episcopalians, the Book of Common Prayer. I love the way Daniel Stevik says it:

*The Prayer Book is made mine through bonds of love and debt. It is mine somewhat as my country is mine or my language is mine. I spend a lifetime under its unhurried instruction, slowly discovering what it knew all along and what it will tell me when I am ready to hear.*

*Spirituality of the Prayer Book* – essay by Daniel Stevik.

Downstairs in the mysterious recesses of our Joy Jungle classroom there is a vast wardrobe of costumes and angel outfits, crowns and shepherds' garb. It would be

hilarious to roll them out one Sunday morning and have people put on something from this eclectic wardrobe as they entered church, to make the point that this is a place that clothes you with the stories of scripture and the lives of the saints, the alphabet of grace. St. Mark's doesn't roll out wardrobe carts into the narthex where you can pick up a breastplate of righteousness or a helmet of salvation or at least not that you can see. But week by week you and I and this whole odd and wonderful community of faith are being clothed and made into God's peaceful armor-bearers. If we could see beneath the surface of things to a deeper plane, you would notice that someone is sporting a rather shiny belt of truth or that someone has now donned a dazzling helmet of salvation or that so-and-so's breastplate of righteousness has a new jewel in it.

"As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Alleluia.