

Psalm 84, Ephesians 6:10-20: Let Me Tell You About Armor

HEBREW SCRIPTURE LESSON: Psalm 84

A song of praise to the Lord!

¹ How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!

² **My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.**

³ Even the sparrow finds a home, and the
swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young, at your
altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.

⁴ **Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.**

⁵ Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

⁶ **As they go through the valley of tears
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.**

(Responsively)

⁷ They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

⁸ **O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob!**

⁹ Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.

¹⁰ **For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.**

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house
of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.

¹¹ **For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favor and honor.**

No good thing does the LORD withhold
from those who walk uprightly.

¹² **O LORD of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.**

NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE LESSON: Ephesians 6:10-20

⁶¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

GOSPEL LESSON: Mark 10:13-15 *Let the little children come...*

¹⁰¹³ People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

Reader: The Gospel of the Lord.

People: *Praise to you, Lord Christ.*

Psalm 84, Ephesians 6:10-20: Let Me Tell You About Armor

So, what do you put on each day? That is, what do you wear?

When I worked in business, I wore suits – skirts and jackets, blouses, heels – I know, quite a change from today. Now, I wear – at least to worship – this collar, slacks, practical orange shoes and a large cross. Most times I wear a robe and a stole on Sunday mornings.

We wear different outfits for different purposes don't we? When I'm hiking, that's when I'm most intentional about what I wear. I put on lightweight, water/sweat wicking pants and shirts which don't weigh me down. They keep me cool and dry. I wear long sleeves and long legs to keep the sun, the poison ivy, and every sort of insect off my body. I tuck my pant legs into my smart wool socks that keep my feet from chaffing and blistering. I wear sturdy shoes with good tread so that my feet stay healthy *and* under my legs not over my head. I wear a cap to shade from the sun, to keep things from dropping onto my hair while I'm in the woods, and to keep the rain off my glasses. And I always carry my hiking poles to propel me forward and to keep me – again, from having my feet go higher than my head.

Still, I have worn a lot of different outfits. When I played tennis, I wore those little skirts, a matching shirt, and, of course, TENNIS shoes! When I swim -- which is infrequent and rarely around people I know, I wear a swim suit. When I was twelve years old, I wore a box! Okay! It was Halloween, and I had dressed myself as a crossword puzzle -- that you could actually fill in, of course. But nonetheless, I have even worn a box!

But in all my life, I have never -- ever -- worn a suit of armor! Have you?

Paul, the stated writer of the letter to the Ephesians that we heard this morning, suggests we put on a *suit of armor*. Not much of a fashion choice, there. Can you imagine doing that today? All I can see in my mind's eye is the Tin Man from the *Wizard of Oz*. You know, "Oi-l." But, that's not how we dress today, is it?

If you are a student or a stay at home parent, you'll dress differently. If you are a painter or a carpenter, you'll dress differently. You'll likely dress differently if you are a teacher or you are a lawyer. How about a dentist? Take just a moment to picture yourself in your most usual attire other than pajamas ...then replace that outfit with a suit of armor. Doesn't make a lot of sense, does it?

Because the truth is, what we put on *outside* is only part of what we "put on" for the day. Eleanor Rigby – according to the Beatles song – puts on a face that she keeps in a jar by the door. What "game face" do you wear? Behind that game face is your guiding principles. The armor we heard about this morning are a host of guiding principles that -- when you put them on -- help you navigate more safely and more successfully. Other guiding principles won't be as successful; they may actually fail you and lead to harm.

For some people the guiding principle is, "Whatever is best for me – or for me and my family – today." For others the guiding principle is, "Whatever gets me the most profit." Or it could be, "Whatever will make people like me...or not be mad at me." Or it could be, "Whatever is safe...whatever does not require me to

Psalm 84, Ephesians 6:10-20: Let Me Tell You About Armor

change...whatever keeps it 'the same as it's always been.'" Or it could be, "Whatever makes *me* happy...or *her* happy...or *him* happy."

This is a common list of guiding principles. There is nothing surprising here. The only surprise may be not knowing what yours is...and then discovering it is one of these! As people of faith, we are invited to live by Godly principles, but are we? Are we as intentional about putting on our guiding principles as we are about the clothes we wear?

Consider for a moment if you can identify what one of your guiding principles is...and – if you can – write it down. Otherwise, give yourself an assignment to figure that out. Because, understanding what motivates you is an important question! Guiding principles are just that! They lead us down different paths. We'll choose this job over that job; this companion over that companion; this choice over that choice. Guiding principles are very powerful; perhaps more than you know. But, if you really think about it, you'll see that you've made some really good decisions and some really bad decisions based on your guiding principles.

If life was fair – perhaps some of this wouldn't matter. But, life isn't fair. And temptation – that insistent urge to go after that shiny apple – is right next to it. We go from, "That candy is in a dish within my reach, I think I'll take it" – as we toddle about – to "This thing can make me rich; I think I'll do it. This thing is attracting me, enticing me; I think I'll grab it." And down some random paths we go – some of wasted time and energy; some of misdirection; some of actual destruction. And, there is real danger in the world, isn't there?

We see these misdirections and destruction every day. They are plastered all over the police blotters in our local papers and on the front page of the New York Times. And they result in financial ruin and broken economies; broken families and broken societies; loss of health and, even, loss of life. All this can be explained by the fact that billions of people are all heading in different directions based on their guiding principles.

It all comes back to our guiding principles. As Viktor Frankl, Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor, once noted, "everything can be taken away from a person except one freedom – (and that is) one's unique response to life's challenges." Your unique response comes from your guiding principle; what is it?

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians challenges us to have a principle, a guiding principle, and he called it "God's armor". In the same way that you put on your suit and tie, your jeans and your shirt, your dress and your pearls, he implores us *to put on a number of things*. What if we were as intentional about the principles we wear as we are about the clothes we wear?

We're going to barrel right through this today because it really could have been a whole sermon series if I'd thought more about it -- so I'm going to ask you to listen with the Holy Spirit on your shoulder. We're going to have a quick stop at each of the six pieces of armor that Paul suggests we have. I am hoping one stands out for you. So, let me tell you about armor.

Psalm 84, Ephesians 6:10-20: Let Me Tell You About Armor

1. The first is a **belt of truth**. The belt of truth. What is truth? Jesus said to Pilate, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” To which Pilate responded, “What is truth?” (John 18:37-38 NRSV) Who defines truth for you? Is truth whatever you need to do to profit your family...or to make lots of money...or to be liked...or to be safe...or to be happy? Or is it a bigger, more complex truth that comes from living a faithful life in the presence of God and in the companionship of other faithful travelers who can help you discern God’s will? *Whose belt of truth are you wearing?*

2. Paul also implores us to put on the **breastplate of righteousness**. A breastplate for soldiers of days gone by was to protect his vital organs – especially his heart. Wearing it emboldens him to do his duty. Living a faithful life in the presence of God and in the companionship of other faithful travelers emboldens us -- just like that breastplate -- to seek out what is evil and what is unjust and, when we see it – to speak out and to act and work for justice. Rather than just protecting myself and mine, I see beyond to the harm caused to others and I am motivated to act when I put on God’s breastplate of righteousness. *Are you wearing God’s breastplate of righteousness?*

3. Paul also implores us to put on **shoes so that we are ready to spread the good news of peace**. Now, shoes may seem like a strange piece of armor, but in ancient times – and even in many countries around the world today – people are barefoot. Shoes protect your feet from scrapes and cuts and bruises. They help you move faster over uneven ground and hazards. Having *God’s shoes* on means that you have more than just protection of your feet – you have guidance for your path. When the way becomes hostile, God’s shoes point you in the right direction. When you wear God’s shoes, *you* are a bearer of the good news of peace – something this world needs a whole lot of! What if billions of people wore God’s shoes? *I know you are wearing shoes...but are you wearing God’s shoes?*

4. Paul also implores us to **wear the shield of faith**. To quote the Letter to the Hebrews, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) Or put another way, faith, is trusting that God is bringing about a new and better way for humanity and is asking us to put our hope in it and our efforts to bringing it about – even when we cannot see the proof of it before our eyes. *Are you wearing the shield of faith?* A shield that emboldens you to act even when you cannot see the results clearly?

5. Paul also implores us to put on **the helmet of salvation**. Put another way that you may have heard if you are over 50, who is in the driver seat of your life: you...or God? Have you said to God, “I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what you will. Rank me with whom you will”? This is the helmet of salvation. When you put this on your head you make God and God’s will the guiding principle of your life. Suddenly, truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation – all begin to take a shape that is pleasing to the eye and to the heart and to the soul

Psalm 84, Ephesians 6:10-20: Let Me Tell You About Armor

and to God. *Are you wearing the helmet of salvation? Are you saying, "yes" to God today?*

6. The final piece of armor Paul implores us to wear is **the sword of the Spirit** which he explains to us is God's word. We know God's word by studying our sacred text, the *Bible*, and through the life of Jesus – the one the Gospel of John teaches us is the "living Word of God". If we're going to speak God's truth, extend God's righteousness, spread God's good news of peace, extinguish evil – if we're going to do all of that, we're going to need to know what God's word tells us. It's the blade that sharpens us and helps us take that stand in the face of great adversity. *Do you have the sword of the Spirit?*

So, that's it in a nutshell. We could probably take six weeks to reflect on this one small piece of scripture. But we've run right through it. I wonder if you took a note. I wonder if you might reflect on it more deeply later when you get home. I wonder if you might pray to God a prayer like, "Of all these six pieces of armor, O God, which do you want me to put on? What have I been leaving in my closet at home before I face my day?"

Have you considered what you call truth? Is it something that you use to discern God's will? Or is it more self-serving than that? "Truth is what serves me." What do you think?

Do you understand what it means to perform acts of righteousness and justice in the world? It can be quite scary. But what if we could feel God's breastplate protecting you? What might you confront in our world today if you felt the breastplate of righteousness on you?

You might have the hippest, grooviest, smartest, downest, coolest orange shoes ever! But have you put the wings of eagles on your feet? Or the steady, sturdy shoes of persistence or tenacity or insight or enthusiasm that comes from knowing the right words to say at the right time to offer good news to someone because you stepped out of your comfort zone and offered Good News to them?

How about your faith? Have you jumped out of any planes lately? That's just a figure of speech, of course. But have you been willing to go out on a limb, not knowing the outcome, but trusting that God is in it and has a plan for you -- for your welfare and not for your harm? The shield of faith is a way of stretching yourself beyond your safety zone so that you can be more light, more love, more compassion in the world.

The Helmet of Salvation is a hat we progressives don't often put on. That's because it all sounds like, "Tell Jesus you're a sinner and eternal life in heaven is yours." But really, this helmet is a commitment to God. Have you made that commitment? Perhaps during our anointing time at the end of the service today, you will come up for a prayer as you release the stronghold grip you have on your life so that God can get in there and use all of the wonderful talent, love, compassion, willingness that you have for the betterment of the world. But that takes a commitment. The Helmet of Salvation says, "Yes" to God and "No" to a bunch of other stuff. I hope, if you've never said that out loud, that you will say it today.

Psalm 84, Ephesians 6:10-20: Let Me Tell You About Armor

Finally -- again -- are you carrying the sword of the Spirit? So often today, people who care about the whole spectrum of diverse peoples in this world and who struggle to be more and more accepting -- don't know the Bible as well as they should! If they did, they would find words of exceptional acceptance. The sword of the Spirit is giving voice for the voiceless and giving voice to things that are so often left unsaid. I think that, today, this may be one of the most important pieces of armor that we can put on...but, maybe that's just the one that God wants me to write down!

So, that's all six of them again. Feel free to go through this passage when you get home. In the meantime, I'd like to sum up our message this morning with the words one pastor I admire. He said, "We need to become large-souled, world-loyal people, compassionate, yet firm in times of trial. Difficulties do not excuse us from moral greatness. We are largest in stature when we face life's challenges with love and equanimity. On the cross, Jesus forgives his enemies. Their hate cannot determine his response: his love is stronger than their fear, and his grace is stronger than their sin." (Bruce Epperly) As Frankl said, in the end, each one of us has something no one can take from us and that is our unique response to life's challenges. What is your guiding principle? Is it the armor of God?

This morning I had us hear Jesus say some words that are familiar to many of us, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." I included these words because it is a reminder to us that we wear our armor not only for ourselves but also for the next generation and the next generation -- our children -- that we may lead and protect them as they join us in our pilgrim's journey for the transformation of the world.

Blessings on the journey. Amen.