

Ephesians 6: 10-20

Shoes of Peace

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Ephesians 6: 10-20

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[Paul writes:] 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.



“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

That’s the goal isn’t it? Followers of Jesus are to be peacemakers. All of God’s children are to be peacemakers. Those who preach, who live, the good news of peace are faithful children of God.

Not for Rome, though. Rome ruled its empire with an iron fist and a massive and brutal army. Its rule suppressed insurgents with violence. Its rule suffocated through crucifixion those who dared

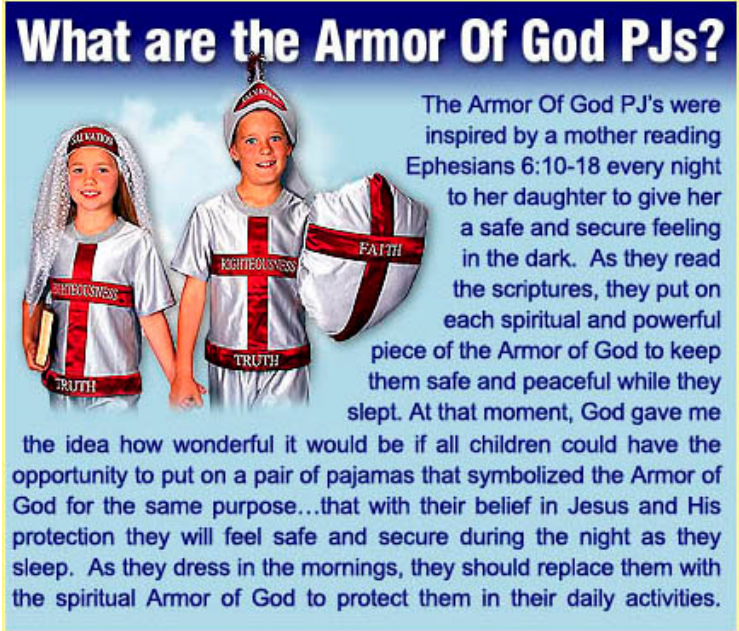
challenge injustice. Its rule was only through military might, through shock and awe, through occupation and propaganda. To that point in history, Rome was the empire to beat all empires.

What if we challenge the empire with its own words, with its own tools, with its own imagery? That's what Paul has done in the Ephesians letter. The letter is written, probably by a student of his, as if Paul is in prison. He sees his Roman guards following orders – suppressing the insurgency through force and chains. Paul looks out from his cell and he knows that nothing physical can hold back his message – not Roman swords, or shields, no armor or breastplate. Nothing can hold back the message of the followers of Jesus. Nothing.

The beauty of this passage from Ephesians often gets lost on us 2000 years after they were written. You see, Paul isn't promising us victory through the armor we wear. It's not about protection from all the evils around us. It's not even so much about spiritual warfare as it is about what we have in our faith that enables us to be the peacemakers that God has created us to be.

Up until my son Tim was about 5 or 6 years old, I had insisted that he not have any military-related toys – no guns, no tanks, no little plastic soldiers, nothing that symbolized the opposite of God's call to peace and reconciliation. But the toys started to slip past us – a cap gun at the 4th of July celebration when we lived in Narberth; Transformer robots that fought to save the world; water guns that kept us cool in the summer. And then someone – a grandparent I think – snuck through my defenses a set of plastic armor from the toy store. A breastplate, a shield, a helmet, a sword. I then began seeing the same toys in “Christian” catalogues – there they were the “armor of God” in an attempt to make it less military and presumably more acceptable. The pieces were titled with the Ephesians designations – the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the spirit.

We pretend that when violence and its weapons are placed in the context of something we revere, like scripture, it's acceptable. I found in an online advertisement something called the “Armor of God” PJs. Cute little boy and girl decked out in white pajamas with a red cross and waistband – across the shirt “Righteousness”, across the waistband “Truth,” some kind of head scarf with “Salvation” on it. The little boy holds a shield – not sure how you sleep with that – with a red cross and the word “Faith.” “God gave me the idea,” the ad reads, “how wonderful it would be if all children could have the opportunity to put on a pair of pajamas that symbolized the Armor of God ... that with their belief in Jesus and His protection they will feel safe and secure as they sleep. As they dress in the mornings, they should replace them with the spiritual Armor of God to protect them in their daily activities.”



What are the Armor Of God PJs?

The Armor Of God PJ's were inspired by a mother reading Ephesians 6:10-18 every night to her daughter to give her a safe and secure feeling in the dark. As they read the scriptures, they put on each spiritual and powerful piece of the Armor of God to keep them safe and peaceful while they slept. At that moment, God gave me the idea how wonderful it would be if all children could have the opportunity to put on a pair of pajamas that symbolized the Armor of God for the same purpose...that with their belief in Jesus and His protection they will feel safe and secure during the night as they sleep. As they dress in the mornings, they should replace them with the spiritual Armor of God to protect them in their daily activities.

Hmmm. I'm not so sure that I want my children falling asleep thinking that they are going to be attacked in the middle of the night and that they need extra protection to keep away whatever might sneak into their bedrooms and dreams. I'd rather they fall asleep knowing that they are safe and secure no matter what goes on around them and that the rest God allows for us is what strengthens us for the day that's ahead. It feels similar in some ways to that promise of the empire from several years ago that duct tape and plastic will protect us from evil terrorists bent on taking away our freedom and way of life.

Paul has not included the armor imagery here so that we might pretend that the violence of weapons is what protects us. He uses it because it is what surrounds him – and us, if you will – and it is what pretends to be a threat to him and God's word. If we lock him up, the Roman authorities think, he won't be able to get to his followers and lead them in revolt. If we use physical force to suppress him they can't rise up and threaten us. But Paul says "Baloney!" "No empire can hold back the word of God – no power of this world can pretend that it 's power is real – no threat can hold back what God has put in motion in Jesus."

But, okay, you want to play like weapons matter? Here then are the "weapons" of the Jesus follower which we will us to bring about the collapse of all empires – truth, righteousness, salvation, God's word, faith, and most of all peace. The shoes of peace are what we stand in and stand on as we resist the evil of the empire.

The Letter to the Ephesians is not interested in conquest; it is not about dividing people into those to be loved and those to be hated. Instead it identifies the need for resistance. Before turning to this military imagery the Letter talks about personal empowerment in relation to Christ. That's the focus. What is power about? If you read before this point in Ephesians you see that power is about reconciliation and love, about the overcoming of barriers, religious and otherwise. The Letter celebrates the overcoming of powers at the point where barriers are dismantled and people come together in peace and hope. This is not a "flesh and blood" battle like we

might be tempted to believe is the way to resist. This is not about violence for violence, not about my armor versus your armor.

An African-American theologian uses a powerful image from the American Civil Rights Movement to emphasize this passage:

Praying in the Spirit may not be fashionable or cool but this is a nonviolent fight, God-style. This is not a return violence-for-violence battle. It is a nonviolent one. The only offensive weapon is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (v. 17). We are called to fight with words, a nonviolent means during war. In God's army, the fighting tactics are different. Our only weapon is a word. There are no guns, no knives, and no fists. Only the command "to stand" (vv. 11, 13). It doesn't say attack, kill, maim, or torture. Just "stand." "Stand" up and say "I am a man," just like the black Memphis sanitation workers on strike in 1968. "I am a man," when I stand for what is right. "I am a man" when I don't fight with fists. "I am a man" when I struggle with life non-violently. "I am a man" when I fight the cosmic powers with words, and not any word, but the word of God, our sword of the Spirit. Words are not just rhetoric, but words are power, the power of God in our mouths. This non-violent sword is not in our hands, but in our mouths and hearts. "I am a man," a person with dignity, honoring another's dignity, when I fight in this way.

<http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopUpLectinaryReading.asp?LRID=36>

We are men and women of the Spirit, of dignity and justice and reconciliation. We are men and women of God, aren't we?

I was appalled this week when I saw photos of people openly carrying weapons at town meetings and rallies focused on health care reform— handguns and automatic rifles – carrying them simply because they have the right to do so in those particular states. Of what use is a right if you are using it immaturely as a threat? If you allow common sense and decency to be trumped by it? What is the point of displaying a weapon of violence? It is to convey the ability to perpetrate violence indiscriminately whenever and wherever I want – to show that I am the one with the power to oppress and to judge – to insert the threat of violence into a public word discourse about justice and abundant life.

How do we resist? With words – not with any kind of violent weapons – with truth and righteousness and love and reconciliation all of which belong to God. It is the only way, says Paul. It is the Jesus way.

I think the most powerful image in this piece from Ephesians is one which we so often ignore when reciting the passage, one which easily gets dropped from our memorizing of it, the one which the pajama-promoter seems to have conveniently forgotten.

“As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.” (v 15) the Letter reads. Shoes of Peace. Whatever will make you ready for the war which is to come? Whatever will protect you from the violent conflict between believers and non-believers? Whatever will allow you to move forward in your attempts at conquest? No! **“Whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.”**

One writer reflects on it this way:

The shoes of the gospel of peace interest me. My son has autism and doesn't speak, so much of the communication in our house is non-verbal. When my wife and I come down each morning the first thing my son does is check our shoes. He's learned that the shoes we have on speak volumes about the kind of day we have planned. Dress shoes mean work. Scuffed slip-ons mean a casual, more relaxed day around the house.

In *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner writes, "If you want to know who you really are as distinct from who you like to think you are, keep an eye on where your feet take you." Peace is the goal. Our feet, not our words, will get us there. The author of Ephesians doesn't commit to any one style of shoe as THE most appropriate for spreading the gospel of peace. I suppose wing-tips or high heeled pumps will do, even Crocs or flip-flops. But my experience is that spreading peace is hard work. My money would be on work boots as the best, probably a pair with steel toes. (<http://jointhefeast.blogspot.com/2009/07/august-23-2009-ephesians-610-20-david.html>)

Put on the shoes of peace and let them lead you closer to where God can use you in this world. Put on your feet whatever it is that will allow you to proclaim exactly what it is that Jesus has taught us. “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Those words come straight from the Teacher’s mouth. Use them as your shoes and walk the words toward their living reality in this world.

Amen.