

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Resurrection People: Wearing God”  
The Rev. Susan Beaumont  
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Isaiah 49:1-7; Ephesians 6:10-20

I attended a Roman Catholic elementary school as a child. We wore uniforms. Grey and blue pleated plaid skirts. Matching vests with the school logo. White shirts with a Peter Pan collar. Snap on blue ties. And a beanie worn on our heads while attending mass.

I had a love/hate relationship with my uniform, the whole eight long years I wore it. On the one hand, it was easy, and it provided safety. There was never any argument in our household about what clothes were appropriate for school. No energy invested in shopping.

The uniform was also a great equalizer. You could never tell who had money to invest in clothes, and who didn't. You couldn't tell who might have fashion flair and who didn't. We all looked equally terrible in it. In that sense, the uniform protected me. It was impossible to distinguish me, a geeky late bloomer, from the more popular pack of kids around me. With that uniform, I had a shot at fitting in.

On the other hand, the uniform was restrictive and demanding. Our teachers, the nuns, instructed us in the responsibility of wearing the uniform. It was a signature trademark of St. Raymond's parish school. We weren't just wearing clothing, we were wearing the identity of the parish. When someone saw us in the uniform, they knew whose we were. There was pride in that, but also a fearful accountability. It demanded the highest moral character and standards of propriety and cleanliness. Some days I measured up to those standards. Most days I did not.

In today's scripture, Paul writes to the community in Ephesus, inviting them to put on an unusual uniform. He challenges them to put on the identity of Christ; to wear the attributes of God.

He likens the attributes of God to the components of a suit of armor. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and prayer. These are associated with the belt, breastplate, shield, sword, and helmet.

I must admit that this has always been a troubling scripture passage for me. The references to war and battlegrounds, cosmic evil, the armor. All of it incites a level of machismo and bravado that makes me squirm. However, in preparing this message I've gained new appreciation for some of the brilliance of these verses.

The Letter to the Ephesians, like most of Paul's letters, addresses a tremendous clash of cultures found around the Mediterranean Sea in the first century. The entire region is under the rule of the Roman Empire. There are competing cultures, beliefs and religions operating at odds with one another inside the empire. The Romans are the unifiers of this eclectic empire, but the Romans are also the universal oppressors.

Notice that Paul uses the uniform of the oppressors (the Roman guard) to teach the Ephesians about the strength of God. Historically, the Ephesians worshipped the pagan goddess Diana. But, Paul doesn't use goddess imagery to teach them. And, although Jesus was a Jew, Paul doesn't pick Jewish imagery to teach the Ephesians about Christ. He uses the imagery of the Roman soldier-the oppressor.

What's the lesson? Wearing God will make you stronger than that which oppresses you. A community that embodies faith, truth, righteousness, peace and salvation is infused with God's power. That community can overcome any form of evil and oppression.

I particularly like Paul's use of active verbs. Three times in these ten short verses, Paul uses the phrase-take it. Don't just passively wait for the oppressor to give you your power. Three times he says-put it on. You can't admire these traits from a distance. You must embody them. Three times he says-stand up. This wardrobe comes with responsibility. You, Christian, are wearing the very strength of God. Take it. Put it on. Stand up.

I wonder, if Paul wrote a letter to our faith community today, encouraging us to be strong in our faith, would he use the same metaphor? Armor was a great metaphor for the first century Roman Empire. Probably not so much for today. Paul was known for adapting his message to the specific context of the community.

Several weeks ago, I heard a speaker whose ideas have stayed with me. Her name is Kerry Egan. Kerry is a hospice chaplain. She makes her living sitting with the dying and suffering. What I found unusual about Kerry was her personality. I encounter many hospice chaplains in my line of work. They share a predictable temperament. Most are quiet, introverted thinkers, non-reactive, thoughtful, and somber.

Kerry was different; boisterous, extroverted, talkative, funny. She laughed easily. She was joyful. The more I learned about Kerry's story, the more I was drawn to her. She has endured a chapter of great personal suffering in her own life, and she immerses herself daily in the suffering of others. Yet, she wears a uniform of joyful strength.

Here is how Kerry talks about wearing God's strength:

When I first started working in hospice, someone told me this: In most of life, you can be weak inside and get through by putting on a tough outer shell. But if you work in hospice, you have to stay soft on the outside. So in order to stand up straight, you have to have a spine of steel. Two ways to go through the world, two ways to deal with the loss that is an inevitable experience in life-with a hard shell or with a rock-solid backbone (Kerry Egan. "On Living." New York: Riverhead Books, 2016. Pages 109-110).

So church, which way will you choose to move through the world? With a hard-outer shell, like the armor of the first century Roman soldier-or with a rock-solid backbone, formed and strengthened by truth, faith, righteousness, peace and salvation.

Perhaps, much of the scary stuff we are experiencing culturally and politically today is the result of too many people trying to be strong by putting on hard-outer shells. We put up our shields to protect ourselves from ideas we don't agree with. We wield the sword of our own self-righteousness and attack the shortcoming of the "other." Truth has become something arbitrary, with everyone yelling "fake news" at everyone else. Salvation is something that the other guy needs.

We can be different. As Christians, we are called to be different. We can move through our world with rock-solid backbones, standing firm against injustice, but bending, yielding and growing in our mutual pain, loss and confusion. We can demonstrate strength through vulnerability.

These past seven weeks, we have been exploring what it means to be an Alleluia community, an Easter people. Each week has concluded with a challenge to the community.

Here is your challenge for this week, church. Look for an opportunity to demonstrate your strength- with vulnerability. Maybe it will be an opportunity to simply sit and listen to someone with whom you disagree. Maybe it will require you to serve in a place that feels uncomfortable to you. Perhaps it will be speaking out against an injustice you witness. Possibly, it will be an opportunity to share your faith story with someone else.

Whatever it is, look for that place where the world needs a strong Christian presence, and step into that place with a rock-solid backbone born of your faith. And God's strength will be with you and in you. Amen.