

Protective gear

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on August 23, 2015, the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

Therefore take up the whole armor of God...fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness...take the shield of faith...and take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit which is the Word of God. Ephesians 6:13-17

I know that our inner character is more important than what we wear, but I'm always curious about those photos of fashionable and well-dressed people in the style section of the Sunday New York Times. Those who are shown on the streets of New York are always up on the current style and color in vogue for the week.

Saint Paul in his letter to the Ephesians uses the imagery of the Christian being clothed with the protective spiritual armor in the battle against sin. The image of the Christian as a soldier is not popular with generations that have seen so much international armed conflict. Old hymns such as Onward Christian Soldiers and Soldiers of Christ Arise have fallen out of favor. If you read the text of Onward Christian Soldiers you realize that it is about marching as to war against sin and evil. My objection to the hymn was not that it was promoting war, but that it was sung every week when I was in Sunday school that I became a Sunday school dropout!

The fact remains that life in Christ is a serious struggle against sin and we must be resolute in refusing to make any peace with oppression. It is one thing not to have committed sins of a serious nature, but we must also be on guard against sins of omission. When we see dishonesty, greed and unfaithfulness and don't do or say anything, our silence implies complicity. We need to be equipped with the spiritual armor of God to fight against all that is wrong and unjust and oppressive. Whether the battleground is between nations or individuals or within ourselves we can't emerge from the battle unscathed.

However we encounter the evils of injustice and oppression, our response or non-response to sin and evil reflects our inner conviction. It is our motives, our intentions and our basic attitude that determine the quality of our character. When driven by greed, envy and deceit, our relationship with God and other people is seriously challenged. While it may be true that a clear conscience is a soft pillow, it may only be the result of a selective or bad memory!

Original sin is often misunderstood to mean that we are born sinful. Nothing could be further from the truth. Original sin means that from our origins we misuse our gift of free will by going against what we know is right. Common sense tells us that newborn infants are in a state of grace and can't be held accountable for their actions. We were all born into a spiritual Garden of Eden. Growing up at some point known as "the age of reason" we learned the difference between right and wrong and at some point we willfully chose to do what we knew to be wrong. It was at that point that we left our state of innocence and our spiritual Garden of Eden to enter the world of sin never to return. After that, we are held accountable for our actions. The more we learn right from wrong, the better equipped we are with the spiritual armor to contend against sin. Mature adults are expected to have the ethical and moral resources for an informed conscience to keep us from living by the lowest common denominator. We all share the responsibility of leading lives that reflect the maturity of an informed conscience.

While Saint Paul was in prison his Roman guards in full armor may have inspired him to describe how the Christian needs to be clothed in spiritual armor to withstand the forces of evil. He lists the required figurative armor of God to contend against evil. We begin by putting on the belt of truth to hold our armor in place. Next we put on the breastplate of righteousness to defend against the slings and arrows of falsehood and injustice. We wear shoes that will enable us to take the gospel of peace wherever we go. On our head we wear the helmet of salvation. In one hand we hold the shield of faith, loyalty and trustworthiness to deflect against exploitation and oppression. In our other hand we hold the sword of the Spirit, the Spiritus Gladius that is the Word of God. The double-edged sword is the symbol of Saint Paul because the Word of God reaches into our innermost soul.

To be girded with all the knowledge of good and evil is our most important piece of spiritual armor. The standard is not set by what can get away with, but by knowing and doing what we know is right and just in each and every situation. Let there be no denial of the power of evil forces in the world. Everyday we learn of new schemes designed to exploit the innocent. We rely upon the essential qualities of our Christian character that include understanding, empathy and compassion. We must be slow to accuse and quick to forgive. We must never let ourselves be compromised nor give into evil powers. To do anything less is to allow ourselves to become victims of our own oppression.

In John Bunyan's classic allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, the central character is Christian who is clothed with the spiritual armor of God. He encounters the challenges of all manner of evil in his journey between the City of Destruction and his destination to the Celestial City. On his journey Christian overcomes the various forces that try to discourage him in reaching his goal. When he reaches the Wicket Gate in the village of Morality, he is tempted to settle for less than his goal. Finally, the burden of sin and weakness is lifted from his shoulders and the battle is over when he arrives at his destination. After overcoming the obstacles of fear and temptation, his pilgrimage is completed as he turns over his sword. Arriving at the river's edge, he crosses over to the Celestial City as the welcoming sound of trumpets is heard on the other side.

The character of Christian in Bunyan's allegory encourages us to persevere in imitating Christ by keeping on the right path that leads to our ultimate destination to spend eternity in the presence of God.