Dressed for the Challenge

 Schools in the area have been starting for a couple of weeks now, and more will start on Tuesday. On my Facebook feed, the First Day of School pictures have been popping up on a regular basis – the student on his or her front step or by the school bus door, carefully garbed for a new year of school. New clothes that show just the right amount of attitude, new sneakers on the feet that grew 2 sizes over the summer, new backpack on the back, water bottle in the side pocket and new pens, pencils and notebooks stuffed inside. The student is in uniform, ready and eager for whatever may face them in the year ahead.

 School clothes are often one way we get ourselves dressed to face the challenges of the world outside. We wear other clothes to prepare us for different challenges. This year, our extra-daughter Marissa had to go shopping for a whole new wardrobe when she started her first adult job. We have a variety of work uniforms and tools, whether it’s the tool belt or the computer bag we grab on the way out the door. world. In the summer, we wear as little as we can get away with in the heat, but when the winter cold comes, we bundle up from head to toe. Our clothes signal who we are, what we expect to do and how we want to be perceived by others. As we dress to go out, we prepare ourselves for what we expect to face each day.

 The book of Ephesians was written a long time ago in a world that was different from ours in many ways. It was a world that was ruled by the Roman empire, an empire that was not yet Christian. In fact, Christians were a small, oppressed minority. They risked being thrown into prison or even being killed for their faith. When the writer of Ephesians talks about enemies of flesh and blood, that was a real thing for these people. The physical power of the Roman empire was against them. Yet drawn by the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ and filled with hope for the reign of a different kind of power in the world, a power based in self-giving love and not aggressive oppression, converts turned to this new faith, committing their lives to be followers of Jesus Christ. Baptism was the official starting point of this new life, as the new believers were led into a river or deep pool and submerged, dying to their old life, being born anew in Christ. As they came up out of the water, they were clothed in new clothes, clean and white. Some have suggested that Ephesians was written especially to these new converts on their baptism, who in Ephesians 4: 22-24, are reminded that “you were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self…. And to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God, in righteousness and holiness.”

 It is in this setting of a small, pacifist religious group faced with real and serious opposition from the powers that be that the writer of Ephesians describes the new clothing Christians need to wear in order to deal with the world around them as a suit of armor – the armor of faith. In recent generations, with the fifteen hundred years since Emperor Constantine of Christians literally going into battle under the flag of Christ behind us, many Christians have struggled with that militaristic image of the Christian life. Used as an offensive weapon, many regrettable things have been done in the name of Jesus, thousands if not millions have been killed, cultures have been destroyed. Is this really the way we are to go into the world – armed for battle?

 What we Christians have sometimes lost track of is that our battle is not meant to be against flesh and blood enemies with weapons of steel and gunpowder. It is against “the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil”. In a Bible study some years ago, African American theologian and preacher Marva Dawn discussing the language of “Onward Christian Soldiers” reminded her hearers that following Christ Jesus by praying for our enemies, turning the other cheek, forgiving endlessly, etc., is in many respects to live embattled. It is not to fight against other people. It is not a triumphal war to form a Christian government (a theocracy like that endorsed today by various religious traditions). It is not a struggle opposing non-Christians or back-sliders or even one's own petty and enormous inabilities. The task is much bigger as we battle against the powers and principalities of our own times, against the powers of darkness as they take place in this day and age as we strive with our Lord to bring forth God’s kingdom of justice, peace and plenty not just for ourselves but for all God’s children, whoever and wherever they may be. This struggle against the powers of darkness feels more real to me now than it has for some time. This is the struggle that Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed in his “I have a dream” speech, the anniversary of which passed this week. In his speech, Dr. King spoke of meeting physical force with soul force. That “soul force” is what Ephesians proposes as well, as the armor we are to wear is described.

 It is not physical armor, but spiritual armor. It is not offensive armor, but defensive armor, for protection as we go forth. Just as we get ready for school with new school clothes, or as we get ready for work with our briefcase or bookbag or tool belt, so we take up the tools of our faith as we prepare to meet the challenges that confront us and step out into the world. The virtue of this armor comes not from ourselves, not from our own strength. It comes from God, the source of all righteousness and truth, the ground of all faith, the giver of salvation.

 Our role in the struggle we are engaged in is not to cut down and destroy all who stand in our way. It is to stand firm in the way to which Christ has called us and proclaim the gospel of peace.

 What does this look like in practice? It means that when we wear the belt of truth, we can stand up and speak for truth if someone tells a lie or projects a false picture of reality, whether that happens on a small scale or the national stage. It means that we protect ourselves with the breastplate of righteousness – now doesn’t that conjure an image – doing our very best to behave according to God’s law of love in all situations, whether that means not lashing out at someone we disagree with with words that hurt or reaching out to someone everyone else has cast aside so we can show the world a different way. It means that as we move through the world, wherever our feet go and whatever shoes they’re wearing, we proclaim the gospel of peace, not just with our words, but with our actions as well, doing our best to be peacemakers in all situations. That doesn’t just mean smoothing things over so everything looks nice, but being willing to go deep enough to explore the real roots of conflict and then work to change the system. As we go, it is our faith that protects us like a shield, giving us strength to resist in difficult situations. It is our salvation in Jesus Christ that guards us and guides us. We use the sword of God’s word not to abuse and destroy, but to defend and build up.

 The challenge for which we gird ourselves is not an easy one, so An important point to realize here is that we do not go alone. In the past, I have had the image in my head of the single Christian soldier, armed for battle, ready to take on the forces of sin at war for his or her own soul. But in this passage as throughout the book of Ephesians, all the “you’s” are plural. It is together, as the one body of Christ that we engage in the struggle for God’s reign of justice, mercy, peace and love on behalf not only of ourselves but for the whole world. It is together, like the Roman legions of old or riot police of today, that we lock shields to form a line and stand firm.

 We have faced many challenges in our lives as we have gone out into the world, whether they are the exciting challenges of the first day of school or the first day of a new job, or the challenge of a chronic illness or an obstacle that seemed insurmountable that we had to overcome. The better we prepare ourselves for what we meet, the better we do with the challenge. Now armed with the armor of faith, let us go forth today to meet God’s challenge and do God’s work in the world.

The belt holds up the toga so the soldier can move unencumbered by cloth. The "belt of truth" fixes what is necessary in such a way that it leaves the church free and flexible, able to walk or run, loosed from what constrains or trips the wearer.

The breastplate covers the core of the body. Righteousness protects the heart and lifeblood from cosmic evil.

 The shoes may be my favorite part of this armor – no specific description in terms of style or material, just “whatever will make you able to proclaim the gospel of peace.”

 The shield of faith protects you from all those arrows that are pointed at you – the words that mock you or cut you down, the physical challenges that beset you.

 The helmet of salvation that protects us reminds us of the cross-mark of baptism on our heads, a protection given to us by the God who names us and claims us as God’s own.

 The only piece of this armory that can be used offensively is the Sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, a word that both cuts and saves.