

Suiting up for God
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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Well, it looks like you missed your chance. You're going to be so sad I wasn't your pastor last fall...because you would still have been able to get them. I'm talking about the amazing gift for the favorite child in your life...for \$49.99, from armorofgodpjs.com, you could have purchased a set of silver pajamas ...the pajama tops had the breastplate of Righteousness and a hem of "truth" embroidered in 2 inch letters over a large red striped cross design that was taken from the Knights Templar. The pants included little foot covers that were labeled "Peace" and "Gospel" and there was a pillow in the shape of a shield that had the word faith written on it. The set came with a King James New Testament—a foam sword of Truth and a coloring book. The boys set had a cloth helmet with salvation on it...the other set had a very demure headdress and wimple that said the same thing...But now their website has been hacked by a Chinese group and you can't order your half Roman Centurion/half Knights Templar armor of God pajamas anymore... Page | 1

In the religious fervor leading up to the Second Crusade, 850 odd years ago, where European Christians travelled to the Holy Land and slaughtered thousands of Moslems living in present day Palestine and Israel before being creamed by the Seljuk Turks...Bernard of Clairveaux preached sermons attempting to fire up the crusaders by citing this text and telling the men that as long as they went into battle in the name of Christ...their bodies would be "truly intrepid and safe from anything...so forward into safety knights and with undaunted souls drive off the enemies of the Cross of Christ." (De laude novae militiae, Sancti Bernardi, ed. J. LeClerq, 1963, pp. 214-25).

How did we get from this passage to these, well bizarre, uses of this passage? What do we know about the early church of the time of the writer of Ephesians...Well, they were under Roman rule...oppressed by Roman soldiers...and the tradition tells us that Paul...the one in whose name these words were likely written...was killed by the Roman death machine...I wonder, what would Paul think about the symbol of this text being a Roman soldier?

Early Christians were famously pacifist...Jesus said turn the other cheek...but then again, he also drove out the moneychangers with a whip...he admonished that all who live by the sword die by the sword....but then said he came to bring division, and even in one gospel, "the sword." In reality...Jesus' followers could not be soldiers...in the early church membership in the military was an ABSOLUTE bar to

church membership...One wonders what Jesus and the early church fathers would make of Bernard's sending soldiers to kill heathens in Jesus' name...or about designing children's pajamas that glorify the crusader's bloody red cross...

So, is anyone getting the idea yet that I'm not so comfortable with this text...or more correctly with what the church has done with it for the last thousand years or so? I wonder...for a people that have prided ourselves on worshiping God with our minds as much as our hearts and souls and bodies...I wonder...how could we have messed up this text SO much....

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The church in Ephesus is living under Roman rule...they are subjected to oppression at every turn...and all around them, the symbols of power are symbols of violence....symbols of the very powers and principalities that Paul is warning the people to be prepared for...doesn't it make more sense to interpret Paul's list as being anything BUT militaristic? Isn't it the ultimate effort at irony that, faced with real swords and real helmets and real violence...Ephesians says our protection is....Truth, Righteousness, Faith, Salvation, the Living Word and, well, comfortable shoes. The author is not preparing people for military battles, but for encounters with a world that too often is spiritually toxic.

On virtually every piece of metal the Roman soldiers wore, there was some symbol of the empire, some way of showing WHO these men served...who was their Lord and Master....in whose name they acted and by whose authority they imposed on the people.

What if Paul's admonition is the ultimate statement that followers of Christ are not going to play by those rules...that we aren't going to lay claim to Christ's power and authority to justify any militaristic or other earthly oppression or imposition of power...that like workers in hazmat suits we will use the gifts we have been given to shield ourselves from the corrupting influence of powers that play by those rules....

Maybe the hazmat suit isn't the best analogy here... Maybe the best symbol we can look to...instead of silver battle for Jesus pajamas, we can think about...a black cape...a mask...and some point ears...

It all started back in 2012, I think it was....a viral video on Youtube...of a man dressed as Batman, driving a car that was an exact replica of one of the movie bat mobiles was stopped by police...

Turns out that was Lenny Robinson of Owings Mills, Maryland. Years ago Lenny noticed how kids were in awe of Batman...and he noticed that because Batman doesn't have any super powers, he could use the popular figure to inspire children

to face the challenges before them better than almost any symbol...and so he got an official costume and the car....and began making public appearances at children's hospitals in West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and DC. When he put on the costume, he wasn't simply Lenny Robinson, a man who built a large industrial cleaning business, he was Batman.

Last weekend, Robinson made an appearance at SummerFest in South Charleston, West Virginia...while he was walking through the fair, he encountered Jacob Brown...an 8 year old whose father passed away a year ago...Jacob was being punched by an older boy who had been bullying him for a while...and Jacob called out to Batman for help.

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Lenny congratulated Jacob for not resorting to violence and promised the boy that he would keep in touch...that he would be there for him when he could be as Jacob prepared to go back to school. Sure enough, on Monday, on the first day of school back home in Dunbar West Virginia, at the school assembly, Batman did indeed show up for Jacob...and for all the kids...to bring an anti-bullying message inviting the kids to suit up....by never giving up, doing the right thing, helping other people and never being a bully.

But the Batman who showed up on Monday wasn't Lenny Robinson. Tragically, while traveling home from the fair Sunday night...Robinson lost his life in a car accident. But John Beckman, another member of the Batman army, showed up...in his costume with his bat mobile...determined to keep the promise that Lenny could no longer keep. It was the costume Jacob needed to see....not Lenny...

It forces us to ask...when people look at us...what do people see in us...do they see by whose authority we offer them welcome and friendship, by whose authority we care for the least of those among us, by whose power and direction we oppose forces that tear people down...not by tearing down the oppressors, but by lifting up....

What if that's part of the invitation to "arm" ourselves with these things....Truth, Righteousness, Faith, Salvation, The Living Word...Did you notice what each of them is...other than not a weapon? They are each promises of God...These are what the early church called "The way"...these are the manifestations of the Spirit in our lives...the presence and teaching of Christ...

Wordsworth was right, The world is too much with us...late and soon...the powers and principalities are closing in sometimes....death and apathy and narcissism and fear and greed are forces that directly and indirectly oppress too many of God's

children...they are truly as close as the family down the street whose pension has evaporated, the spouse with the telltale bruises on the next block, the fear of economic instability that this week's stock market tumble probably inspired even in the this very room...

But what is our response? Wordsworth said take a walk in the woods...a nice start...but I want to suggest that perhaps our response is to stand on these promises of God...

- The Truth—That no matter what the culture may tell us, we are loved, we are loveable, we are unique and special with unique and special gifts to offer the world...and so is everyone else.
- Righteousness—That our calling is to do the right thing...that we will be invited to make compromises with our ethics, but if we are true to ourselves and to the God who made us...that should be enough.
- Faith—that we are surrounded by a world that believes in nothing...and in our ability to set aside cynicism and emptiness and cling to God's love for us and the love it inspires us to offer one another...we can be bearers of hope to the world.
- Salvation—we are invited to surrender fear because we are secure in the knowledge that nothing we have done has earned God's love for us....and nothing we can do can take it from us.
- The Living Word—And here's a gift perhaps we don't appreciate enough...the real presence of Christ in our lives...and in our study of the word written....a source of guidance and inspiration concerning God's work with those who came before us...here is where we are invited to turn to seek understanding, to find new hope...and to find humans who've made every mistake we can make...and have nevertheless found their way forward in God's grace and love....

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And here's the Batman moment of it...standing on those promises...we can face whatever comes...and not just that...but we can stand with those who are more storm tossed than we are....as we are empowered to carry these same promises to others....in how we struggle with our own demons, but also how we comfort others...in how we empower them...in how we stand with them in good times and in bad...not hidden behind a mask...but suiting up in these promises, bearing the invisible marks of our baptisms and our humble status as beloved. It's perhaps not as obvious as pointy ears and a carbon fiber car...but ultimately...it brings life...to us...and may God make it so...to all.

Amen.