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“Is It Important What We Wear?”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

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Isaiah 6:1–8; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10–20

O God, as we prepare to enter a new school year, we pause once again in this place to listen for your Word. Let that Word speak to us. Let it penetrate to the very core of our being. To whom shall we go? To whom shall we listen? It is your Word of life, hope, and peace that gives us hope. Open our minds and hearts that we may hear and follow where Christ our Lord leads us. In His name, we pray. Amen.

“Is what you wear important?” We live in a culture that no longer has a single dress code. People wear all kinds of different garbs to all kinds of different places, and I’m sure all of you would have some stories about the variety of apparel you have witnessed. I remember recently getting ready to enter a restaurant. The sign on the door said, “No bare feet, flip-flops, or bathing suits, please.”

Clothes do not a person make, but clothes are important. In fact, our clothes sometimes give us a sense of identity. If you’re walking across any campus, you may see young people who get their identity from the clothes they wear. One young man wears something that says, “Old Navy.” Another one has something on that says, “The Gap.” And then there’s my favorite: “Abercrombie and Fitch.” I’m always sure that whoever is wearing that is an Episcopalian from Virginia!

And then there is that final sort of identification that we get from the clothes we wear: the Nike logo. Those of you who are students of Greek mythology know that *Nike* was a goddess who was the sister of the gods of strength and power and

success. And the Nike swoosh, which you see often (if you watched the recent PGA golf tournament, you saw Tiger Woods with the Nike swoosh on), symbolizes power, victory, and success. Iwan Russell Jones, a theologian and good friend of Marilyn and Hedge Hedgpeth, sees the swoosh as a symbol that represents the values of the civilization in which we live. It is a civilization that has lost its way. Our modern world has become a world in which one football coach famously said, “Winning isn’t everything. It is the only thing.” So in that kind of culture, the swoosh is an icon of power, and we view weakness, failure, sickness, imperfection, and poverty as powerlessness. It’s something to be avoided, something we need to get rid of. If our culture says, “Wear the Nike emblem,” what does that say about those who wear a cross? How do we get our identity?

I am intrigued by the recommendations of the writer of the Letter of Ephesians. We “put on the whole armor of God.” It is the way we should go into the world. It is a metaphor of “dressing up.” We wear things like truth, faith, salvation, justice, and peace. What does this mean, and why in the world would we want to put these things on as we go out into the world? Because it matters what we wear. It’s important.

Recently, I heard about a school that had experienced grave problems with discipline and attendance. There had been a huge turnaround, as violence and hostility were significantly decreased, and attendance has improved. I asked one of the teachers, “What was behind the transformation? How did this happen in this school in an urban environment?”

The teacher responded, “I would say it is the uniforms.”

“The uniforms?” I asked.

“Yes, the new principal required our students to wear uniforms, and it made a big difference. Overnight, discipline problems vanished. The students loved their uniforms. Many of the tensions that they previously felt grew out of the fact that some of the students were unable to afford the kind of clothes that others were able to wear. So there was competition. And many of the tensions between our boys and

girls seemed to dissipate. They loved their uniforms. It has transformed the atmosphere.”

I’m not suggesting that we go to uniforms as Presbyterians. But I do think that we should think about the suggestion of the writer of Ephesians that we put on the whole armor of God. If that sounds superficial or vague to you, you can ask, “Is that all it involves? If I want to be a policeman, do I go out and put on a policeman’s uniform, and then I become a policeman?”

Surely, being a Christian is more than putting on “the whole armor of God.” Elsewhere, Paul says in Rom. 13 that we ought to “put on Christ.” Is that all it is? Put on your Sunday best, be nice and kind, and people will think that you are religious?

Of course, it is more than that, but it is certainly not less than that. Putting on truth, faith, salvation, and peace is to live out a story of God who has come to us not only to give us the gift of life in a world, but to redeem us, to restore us, and to give us hope.

Maybe faith is something that we must act like we have in order to have it. Or as John Wesley once said to his preachers, “Preach faith until you have it.”

Maybe the way to become a Christian community that serves God faithfully in the world is to get up, get dressed on Sunday morning, participate in the rituals of the church, open the hymnal, open your mouth and sing, serve others, and invite others to come to church, and then one day you might wake up and realize you are a Christian. So many things in life work like this, why shouldn’t the Christian faith?

It is what we call practicing. The practices of the faith, when you engage in them, when you reach out and engage in Bible study, when you serve at the soup kitchen or work on a Habitat house, you begin to put your faith into action, and somehow, these kinds of actions transforms us into a faithful follower of Christ.

Jesus said simply, “Follow me.” He didn’t say you have to believe this list of things, or you have to do this. He just said, “Follow me. Put one foot in front of the

other, stumble after me, imitate me, try to walk and live as I walked and lived. Act like you are a disciple of mine; make believe that these folks beside you are your brothers and sisters. Those folks you meet in the street are people created in my image. Live out of this story—a story of salvation, faith, justice, and peace, and it will become a reality among you.

“Put on the whole armor of God.”

To the new officers, to church members of all ages—you need to dress up right to be a part of this community. Just like you don’t go out on the tennis court without a tennis racquet or on a football field without a helmet. You need to practice the faith. That’s what this new school year is all about. It is an invitation to join in the exercises that enable us to faithfully serve the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ.

If you think this language is a little too militant, that maybe we shouldn’t use the combat language to dress up for a struggle, then you must believe that that Christianity goes along with good sense. You don’t need discipline for that. You just do what comes naturally.

If you believe we live in a basically Christian world where being Christian is roughly the normal, natural, American thing to do, then there’s no sense to put on the armor of God for a struggle. You don’t need a sword and shield.

I don’t know many people today who believe that being Christian just means doing what comes naturally. We know that the demands of following Christ are challenging. Someone has said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. Christianity has been tried and found to be difficult.”

Also, this “present darkness,” this world in which we live, encourages us to give up our identity to commercial interests or to all kinds of other allegiances. To stand firm in the faith, you need to put on faith and truth, the truth of God’s love. You not only need to talk the talk, you need to walk the walk, to be prepared. I believe one of the reasons why many of you are here right now, in this service, listening to this sermon, laying your life alongside the demands of the Christian Gospel, is that

you know when you go out into the world, you'll need the sword of faith, truth, and justice, and those things that are given to us as Christians to guide our feet, to enable us to worship and serve the living God, and to make this kingdom of God on earth a reality.

In other words, if you're going to get into the game, you have to put on the uniform. You know it won't be easy. But you have resources—a story about how God's power has been made known to us in Jesus Christ. You know that building community is our goal, and bringing peace instead of hostility is what God wants from us. Not to shout each other down, but to listen to each other. Not to shoot each other, but to find a way to support each other.

The writer of Ephesians says, finally don't forget about prayer. Don't forget about that posture of prayer where you realize that your power and your strength does not reside in you. Your strength is in the Lord. It is God's will that we are seeking to accomplish, and it is by God's power and love and justice and mercy shown to us in a cross, not a swoosh, that we come to know the presence of the living God.

The first time I met Archbishop Desmond Tutu, he had come to Durham. It was during the height of the apartheid period in South Africa. He was in this country, traveling to get support for the effort to end apartheid. He came to Duke Chapel. He brought to mind someone being clothed with the armor of God. He was this little man fighting against this evil system. *All he had was a bible and a grin and a deep faith in God*, I thought. *All that sounds good, but the South African army and the secret police are powers to be reckoned with. They were determined to keep that system in place, and this little man with his Bible and his smile and his prayers and his hymns, what does he have to offer?* Deep down, I must be honest, as attractive as he was, those were my feelings. I was skeptical.

Then he said something that I will never forget. He looked at us and said with a smile, "You know, I believe apartheid is doomed." This was met with silence at Duke Chapel. He continued, "You know why I believe it's doomed? It's because I believe it's against the will of God." Then he reached in his pocket, pulled out a letter. "I also believe it's doomed because I have a letter from an eighty-five-year-old woman in California who wakes up early every morning, gets down on her

knees, and prays to God that apartheid will be abolished. Apartheid doesn't have a chance against that woman's prayers and the will of God."

He was clothed with the whole armor of God. Try it on. It will make a difference. Amen.