

s-Ephes. series 7 -09-Wearing the Uniform
Psalm 46 *God is our refuge and strength*
Eph. 6:10-20 *The whole armor of God* (P16B)
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WEARING THE UNIFORM

There's an old saying, "Clothes make the man." A wonderful example of this is Charles Perrault's well-known fairy tale, "Puss in Boots." A poor miller leaves his estate to his three sons: the oldest gets the mill, the second son gets the donkey, and the third son... all he gets is the cat.

This is no ordinary cat, of course. First of all, it's a talking cat—something that everybody seems to accept as normal—but it's also a criminal genius cat. For a pair of boots, he will make his new master a fortune. The cat catches some nice game—pheasants and rabbits—and sends them to the king in the name of "The Marquis of Carabas." The king is charmed.

Later, Puss has his master take off all his clothes and sit in the river near where the King's carriage will travel. As the carriage comes near, Puss runs out and stops it, crying, "Help! Help! The Marquis of Carabas has been robbed!"

The King stops and rescues the "Marquis," takes him to the palace and outfits him in an appropriately expensive outfit. The King's daughter, of course, falls in love with the handsome nobleman.

Then Puss in Boots really goes into action. He heads out of town, stopping only to threaten some peasants in their fields into saying that the land belongs to the Marquis of Carabas." When he gets to the castle associated with the fields, he boldly walks in and confronts the owner of the estate, an evil giant with magic powers. Being a genius cat, he tricks the giant by challenging him to turn into "something very small." As the giant becomes a mouse, he is promptly gobbled up by Puss.

Meanwhile, the King and the Princess take the Marquis home in their carriage. All along the way, the peasants tell the King that all these abundant fields belong to the Marquis of Carabas. Puss in Boots meets them at the front door of the castle, welcoming his master and his friends. The King, suitably impressed, approves a marriage between the Marquis and his daughter, and everyone lives happily ever after.

The implication may be that we could all be noblemen if we'd only take a bath!

Actually, in Perrault's tales, which include *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Tom Thumb*, there is often an element of things being other than they appear. Cinderella, forced to be a drudge, sits in the fireplace ashes until the Fairy Godmother turns her into the belle of the ball. Sleeping Beauty seems to be dead, but awakens at the kiss of the Handsome Prince. Little Red Riding Hood's granny has an awful lot of facial hair. And so on.

Are people really as easily fooled as the stories imply? Well, we certainly seem to rely a lot on first impressions. That was the basis for the classic *Dress for Success* books and a zillion magazine articles. People will peg you at first glance. You want to give them the right impression.

Another reason to dress in a particular manner is so that you are instantly identified with a group. The military's been on to that one for centuries. But everything from plaid Catholic school clothes to red and blue gang colors to black-and-silver Raider's fan t-shirts are worn as uniforms.

I've been reading a detective novel by Iain Pears, part of his art crime series. Jonathan Argyll, an English art dealer, and his girlfriend, Flavia di Stefano, a member of the Italian art theft squad, are forced by a case to travel between their home in urban Rome and a village in rural Norfolk. Flavia is bemused by the classic English attitude about clothing. It's better to be shabby than flashy. It's also better to be expensive than cheap. The very best, however, is to be both shabby and expensive. Think slightly worn Harris tweeds. Being out of uniform is not quite the thing.

What are the uniforms we wear? Don't think you have one? Of course you do. It goes beyond personal style. Clothes make the man; your choices of sartorial expression say a lot about who you are, where you fit in, and how people ought to treat you.

That's one reason why we hate hospital gowns so much. It's not just the discomfort and humiliation of wearing a backless garment. It's that they're so anonymous, and at the same time, so specifically identifying. You stop being John Jones and Alice Brown. You become A PATIENT. You feel faceless—your identity becomes concentrated in a plastic bracelet—just one more healthcare unit. This is why people in the hospital like to get visits from folks outside. It's a relief to have one's identity confirmed. You're not just room 106, bed B, you're Alice or John again, backless gown notwithstanding.

The truly welcoming church needs to be aware of its uniform, and how it reacts to people who don't conform to it. I'd say we're pretty flexible in this, as we tend to be about most things. Just looking around the room, what would you say is the Sunday morning uniform at Fremont Congregational? Slacks, a sports shirt or sweater, maybe a skirt for the ladies, nothing too dressy. Nobody wears hats. High heels might elicit a friendly joke. Ties seem to be for people like Dr. Sommer and my husband, men of the old school who like to keep up appearances.

But in and among all this business-casual dress we have some mild renegades. We've always had a handful of T-shirt aficionados, and some folks who love shorts in warm weather; that's not beyond the pale.

But a mink coat? Too much. Torn jeans and four layers of dirty sweaters? Might lift an eyebrow. And yet the matron with the fur and the homeless guy wearing his entire wardrobe are also welcome here, despite being somewhat out of uniform.

This last passage in our series on Ephesians contains the well-known image of "the whole armor of God." It seems like a fairly militaristic concept for a group of people who were famous for being total pacifists. You have your breastplate and your shield, your sword and your helmet. It sounds a lot like getting ready to do battle. And sometimes, that's how this is interpreted.

But listen closely to the descriptions of all this armor and weaponry.

Instead of a sword-belt, we are to gird ourselves with nothing but the truth. I have a mental image of literally tying on a sash, like the belt of a priest's robe. It's tremendously symbolic. The warrior's belt held his weapons; the lady of the manor's girdle held her keys; and the belt of truth holds what we, as Christians, are to use to protect and order our world.

For, as the writer says, our struggle is not against our fellow men and women, but against powerful, self-perpetuating, evil forces that use human beings as expendable materiel.

The breastplate of righteousness, now. What would that be, in the design of this Christian uniform? Roman breastplates, at least the fancy ones that officers wore, were quite elaborate. The wearer might have a pretty average physique, but his shiny brass breastplate would be modeled with muscles like Mars himself. Sort of like Batman's costume. You're supposed to believe he's built like that. This was the original way to dress to impress!

Instead of presenting such a hollow impression, obviously, the Christian is to show himself or herself as she really is. To be forthright and vulnerable. What does it mean to be righteous? In this instance I'd say that you're letting your actual actions speak for you, instead of trying to give a false impression of power or perfection.

And then there are those shoes. Roman soldiers wore extra-heavy sandals that basically had cleats on the soles. Gave you better traction in battle. Christians don't need shoes that hold them firmly in place, but rather some traveling shoes. Something from the Walk Shop, or Big 5. Traveling shoes, whether you're going to the opera in Verona or backpacking in the Sierras, have to be sturdy and comfy.

After all, you don't want blisters to slow you down when you're away from home. Notice too, that these traveling shoes are not shoes for waging war, but shoes for spreading peace.

And then there's the shield of faith. That seems to be a pretty self-explanatory image, right? Our faith fends off any evil that might try to harm us. But think about it. Does it really work that way? Ephesians says that this shield is able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. In other words, instead of deflecting evil, it absorbs and neutralizes it. This might be more advice on how to function as a Christian in a dangerous world. Obviously, not by deflecting any evil that comes our way, leaving it behind to find another victim. A better way, a more courageous way, would be to meet it head on, and try, through faith and by faith, to neutralize it. Perhaps by meeting it strength for strength, or sometimes maybe even meeting strength with weakness, sort of a judo maneuver, letting one's opponent's own power be his downfall. I would think that the greatest use of this shield could be in converting the enemy to one's own way of thinking—the Bible is full of this kind of maneuver. Look at Paul himself!

The helmet of salvation is probably not a bronze noggin-protector with a Mohawk of horsehair. What saves us from death is not the quality of the metal between us and the hammer, but Christ's loving gift. I'd venture to say that the helmet of salvation might be a little cap, like a scholar might wear, that indicates that we have learned the wisdom of trusting in Christ to hold our future safe.

Finally, there's the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. If we ever saw any of the other pieces of this whole suit of armor as weaponry, we would still be very wrong to apply that use to this particular sword. The word of God is not a weapon, something to be used to hurt people, to cut them out of society, to chop off whatever gives them life, liberty or happiness. If the word of God is to be seen as a sword, let it be the sword that cuts through all the knots of deception, selfishness, greed, and all the other twisty evils that plague our lives and our world. I think this would be a sword that we would want to wield on ourselves as much as use it on others. The sword of the Spirit is one that cuts through chains of slavery, pain, and guilt and frees us for love and life. It's a sword that cauterizes wounds, shines in the darkness, and acts as a symbol of freedom.

So, this is the uniform we, as Christians, get to wear. If we put it all on, every day, we'd certainly be identifiable as belonging to a specific group. We wouldn't need to worry so much about whether our shirt matched our pants, or if the slogan on our T-shirt was politically correct

enough. The uniform, like all uniforms, would tell people who we are, where we fit in, and... if not exactly how they should treat us, then at least how they can expect us to treat *them*.

It's one thing to be mistaken for the Marquis of Carabas, but we certainly don't want to be lumped in with all those other people wearing backless nightgowns or regular suits of armor. So watch the uniform. What are we saying without words? I hope we're saying, "Welcome." Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Lord God, you are at once mysterious and as plain as day. Help us to drop the masks we wear, the uniforms we put on, the self-images we build, if they prevent us from being who you want us to be or doing your work. Likewise, lead us to uniforms that are useful, encouraging, and even inspiring, and to self-images that are loving but realistic. May we clothe ourselves in Christ, so that we may be seen as part and parcel with him, and as members of your beloved faithful family. Amen.

RESOURCES:

Pears, Iain, *Giotto's Hand* (Berkley Prime Crime, 1994).

Perrault, Charles, *Perrault's Fairy Tales* (Dover Publications, 1969). This book contains the eight stories of Perrault published in *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralitez*, Paris, 1697.