**“Putting on the Armor of Light”**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

For the 14th Sunday after Pentecost

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

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Like many of you, I’m sure, I receive a lot of unsolicited catalogs in the mail each week. Because I am a priest, and because many retailers have figured that out from my purchase history, in addition to the endless flow of Lands’ End catalogs, I also receive lots of catalogs for faith-based products. I generally move these directly from the mailbox to the recycle bin, but, in the slower weeks of summer, I found myself browsing through one. I’ll spare you the litany of exciting Jesus-kitch that can be yours for $9.99. But there was one item particularly that caught my eye.

For $39.99, your child or grandchild can have their very own “Armor of God” pajamas. They look like a medieval knight’s shining body armor, complete with a giant red cross on the chest, and the word “faith” written on the cross-beam. No wardrobe could be complete without it!

As disheartened as I am by this “new low” in combining Christianity, militarism, and consumerism and marketing it to children – the product made me chuckle. And then it got me thinking about something: what exactly is the armor of God, or, as St. Paul’s calls it in today’s reading, the armor of light? To put it more directly: what kind of protection do we seek from God?

I think there is a part in many us, that believes in some way, in the protection of God. It starts early in life, often when a parent or grandparent teaches us how to pray for the first time. If you’re like me, your earliest prayers probably took the form of asking God for things we wanted – either for others or for ourselves. But once we reach the age of anxiety – whatever that is for each of us – our prayers add an additional dimension, in which we don’t just ask God to give us good things, but to protect us from the bad things. In fact, my only memory from childhood of our family ever praying together, other than grace at Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, was the night of the 1989 earthquake in San Francisco, when we felt the most vulnerable and in need of protection.

We’re on solid ground here theologically in asking for and believing in God’s protection. In John’s Gospel, Jesus himself prays to God on our behalf asking literally that God will protect us, Jesus’ followers. And yet, I think most of us in this room today are not naïve enough to believe that the purpose of faith is to serve as some kind of protection plan or insurance policy. We don’t have to get even very far into adolescence, before we must confront the reality that calling upon God to protect us, even in the most earnest and heartfelt of prayer, does not always lead to the kind of protection we are seeking. Do you remember how you learned this lesson? It can happen to us in trivial ways, or in ways that are, in fact, quite serious. And either way, the first time we’re aware of it happening, it raises all kinds of new feelings about our relationship with the Divine.

Where were you, God? What happened? Did I do something wrong? Was I not worth your protection? Are you even still out there?

St. Paul’s call to put on the armor of light, or, as he calls it elsewhere the armor of God, invites us to ponder for a bit what kind of protection we think God offers us. The image of armor is a good way into that reflection. There’s nothing lost in translation here. The Greek work Paul used for armor, “hopla” in fact refers to a military tool for protection. He’s talking about body armor – an essential device to protect the wearer from external threats.

But Paul, especially in his letter to the Romans, his most linguistically and theologically developed writing, was a master of word and image. Like the Gospel writers, Paul uses common images to undermine the traditional meaning of those very images. The classic example of this in the Gospels is the crown of thorns. The crown symbolizes Kingship. Jesus is a king who reigns. But his reign is not marked by displays of wealth and power, rather by displays of weakness and vulnerability – making Jesus’ kingship unique and holy. Here, Paul uses the image of armor, but notes that it is not the physical armor of war that will protect us, but the armor of light. Armor actually made of light? That sounds a bit like the emperor’s new clothes. It is literally nothing, at least, nothing physical. The armor of God is unlikely to protect us from bodily harm. And yet, Paul is saying, if we put on this kind of armor, we will enjoy a kind of protection that is unique and holy.

When we look at what Paul is speaking about in the verses that surround this invitation – we can see that he’s talking about love. The real armor of God is love – specifically the love of our neighbors. The one who loves another has fulfilled the law, he says. Living in fulfillment of the law, loving our neighbors as ourselves, is how we put on the armor of God. While Paul is using a militaristic image – body armor – he is undermining the aggressive dimensions of that image by linking the concept of armor not to strength and power, but to love – which, as anyone who has ever loved another person knows, makes you incredibly vulnerable.

It is vulnerability – openness to another person, to the possibility of your own growth or change in some way – that is at the center of true Christianity. It was God’s love for us that led God to choose to become human, to become vulnerable, in Jesus Christ. And, as Jesus’ followers on earth, it is our love for each other that calls us to be vulnerable with each other. It’s almost a paradox that to really put on the armor of light, means taking off the protective shells around our hearts. To enjoy God’s protection, means to protect ourselves less. To open up, to God, to each other, to our neighbors and to strangers.

God’s promise of protection isn’t protection from being wounded. It is protection from losing our capacity to love, to trust, to serve our neighbors. The longer we live, the more we have to confront the fact that this spiritual outlook is hard to maintain. When our attempts to live this way leave us, at times, bruised, disappointed or deflated, our hearts need protection from despair. We find that protection in the will to return to the practices of loving, caring for, and serving our neighbors – in ways small and large.

As many of you know, last spring, I and my colleagues in the Bedford Interfaith Clergy Association, were active in inviting everyone in our community to commit more fully to loving our neighbors. This was in response to a number of incidents of anti-Semitism and other aggressively discriminatory incidents in our community. We said then that our community will not be defined by acts of aggression, but by how we as a community respond. For us, as Christians, part of our response means taking even more seriously, Jesus’ call to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be open to encountering people of different faiths, races, family structures, levels of wealth, sexuality, than our own – and expect to grow in some way from new relationships. This curiosity about difference is the only armor that will protect us as we encounter the rich diversity that God has given us; and it is really the only armor that Jesus offers.

Today we’re beginning a new church year, sort off. While the liturgical year starts in December with Advent, to me it’s always felt like the Sunday after Labor Day is the real start of the ministry year. We begin our Sunday School ministry, we’ll bless backpacks later today, the choir returns, we welcome Claudia as our new minister of music, sign up sheets galore are up on the bulletin board. Amidst all the new activities beginning this month, I hope you will also take a quiet moment at some point to make for yourself a deeper, more personal new beginning. I hope you will think about how you will put on the armor of God – not the PJ’s but the real armor of God. How you will invite Jesus into your heart, and ask him to help you go deeper in your desire to get to know, care for, and love your neighbors. If we want to change the world, it begins by changing ourselves, by becoming more open to the vulnerable encounters in which transformation can occur, in which the Holy Spirit can lead us into new life. Amen.