

## Putting on Our Clothes

Sermon 111 | Greystone Baptist Church | August 22, 2021

Ephesians 6:10-20

Tis the season of back to school, here in Wake County and across the country as students of all ages once again pack their backpacks with pencils, paper, calculators, tablets, chrome books, water bottles, and a myriad of other items deemed necessary by their teachers and administrators. This year, though, things are a bit different seeing as a good portion of school aged people did not darken the doors of a physical campus last year. In fact, many didn't leave their bedrooms to darken the doors of their kitchens before rolling out of bed and logging into Google Meet or Zoom or whatever form of virtual classroom their schools put into place.

I saw on the news this week that Target stores boasted their sales had exceeded expectations this year. That despite all the Delta Variant havoc spreading across the nation, people were out, and back to school shopping was definitely happening. This stands in stark contrast to last year's "back to school" season in which at least one Target store (and I would assume many stores were in the same boat) had such a great surplus of backpacks, lunch boxes, loose leaf notebook paper, composition notebooks, scissors, pencils, etc. etc. etc. that they donated pallets of supplies to local churches and non-profits in hopes that all of these educational materials could be put to good use, even if they could not be sold off the shelves. Yes, this year, back to school shopping looks quite different from last.

The season is not without its own stressors, however. This year, students worry about how they will be received back into their social groups after so many months apart. They worry about choosing the right classes to set them up for the right majors in college and career paths thereafter. They are anxious about managing the load of extra-curricular activities with academics after so many months of so few competing demands. They worry about the vaccine, the variant, and the very conspicuous reality of being a young person in such a strange and unpredictable world.

In many ways, these worries, these stressors seem so different than those which characterized my back to school experiences. What I remember most is the pressure to have all the right stuff on the first day, as if I had a crystal ball of fashion that I'd been gazing into all summer. Y'all may remember my story about calling up my best friend the night before 7<sup>th</sup> grade started, just to make sure she, too, was going to wear her Jingo jeans. Wide leg "skater" looking clothes had made their way into fashion that fall and I wanted to be sure I wasn't the only one showing up "on trend." But there was another year when boxy backpacks were in, when Billabong jackets were the only thing suitable to keep a kid warm, when Adidas sambas were the only appropriate shoes, and when Shark watches were what all the cool kids were wearing... *these* were the worries I carried with me in the "back to school seasons" of my life. And most of them tended to circle around what kind of clothes I was going to put on.

Looking back though, with the benefit of hindsight and an amateur understanding of adolescent psychology, I see now that all that stress about what I would wear wasn't really about clothing at all. It was about belonging.

My very first memory of today's reading from Ephesians is from youth camp; and every time I read it, my mind goes right back to the large room where our Bible study group met each day. There was very little furniture in the room which otherwise felt like a classroom. We would all sit on the floor, making the perimeter as we leaned against the walls. The day we read this text, we were told to break up into small groups and designate one person to be the model, while others made the "spiritual clothing" out of those big rolls of paper teachers used to cover bulletin boards. We all got to work cutting out paper belts, breastplates, shields, helmets, and of course, swords; with decorative lettering spelling out the words: *truth, righteousness, faith, salvation and Spirit* all across them.

Though the exercise did exactly what it was meant to do – seared an image of myself and my friends as soldiers in the army of God in my mind that will last a lifetime – the irony of our paper wardrobe selections for *this* text, should not go without mention.

This section is near the end of the book when the author is giving his final word of advice and encouragement for faithful living. Using the metaphor of war – no doubt because the average person was used to seeing the Roman empirical guards dressed for battle – Paul subverts the idea that strength can only be exhibited through violence. What many of us fail to notice, certainly what I failed to notice as a young camper, eager to draw and cut out paper clothes, is that tucked away in the middle of these verses which appeal to *our* ideas about power is a little sentence that turns everything inside out. *As for your feet*, the author writes, *put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace* (6:15).

Who said anything about peace? We are putting on our clothes for battle, we're talking about belts, shields, helmets and swords. We are going to fight the powers of evil, and we're going to win! And we know that our enemies are coming to play rough, they'll bring out the big guns... so we will too. We didn't start it, but we are going to finish it.

That may seem like a bit of an exaggeration, but history shows we are somewhat prone to ready ourselves for battle, before we ready ourselves for peace.

You know, even as teenagers, when we were invited to interpret the text and refashion the clothes of the gospel, we still cut out the shapes of war, violence, and human power. Why couldn't we imagine something different?

Perhaps that desire to belong was and is stronger than we ever imagined?

For our children and youth, there can be so much pressure to fit in, coming from all sorts of directions. Pressure to wear the right clothes, look the right way, perform on the sports team or in the classroom. There can be pressure to be in the right place, at the right time, with the right people...

As much as we might like to imagine that these are the pressures and stressors of youth, the truth is that they do not go away in adulthood. They just morph and change into different things like having the right job, making enough money, driving a certain kind of car, seeing the world a certain kind of way, identifying with a certain political party or social ideology...

Perhaps the truth is that rather than going away, the pressure only continues to grow?

Perhaps these are the clothes we are putting on as we prepare ourselves for whatever battles and challenges the days may bring?

Maybe we are putting on clothes like certainty and pride, self-centeredness and personal comfort... Maybe we put on defensiveness and arrogance, ambition and ego. These help us to cover up our more vulnerable realities like insecurity, fear, and uncertainty.

But the scripture reminds us that we don't need to dress ourselves for battle – rather, we are to put on the clothes of faith that help us proclaim the gospel of peace.

The calling is not to pick up the sword and rename it Spirit, not to pick up the shield and rename it Faith as we walk into battle with our defenses up and ready to fight... no, we are to discard the clothes of Rome, the clothes of war, the clothes of every human kingdom and replace them with the clothes of Christ.

We are to put our defenses down, so to speak, to discard them completely and walk into the world ready to listen, ready to feed, ready to heal, ready to welcome, and ready to love.

Now, this will require us to choose different clothing, so to speak. But what better time than right now? What better opportunity than this one, as students head back to school, as some of us are heading back to work, as the week begins anew and we have an opportunity to choose our clothing once again?

What if we begin this year, this season, this week, by laying aside the clothing that we have grown so comfortable in... the clothing that protects us from our fears and vulnerabilities, and instead put on the clothes of humility and compassion? Clothes of curiosity and kindness? Clothes of friendship and solidarity? Clothes of grace, clothes of patience, and clothes of love?

What kind of year could this one be?

Who knows! It's hard to imagine the possibility.

But the time is now to make a choice...

It's time to put on our clothes.