August 25, Ordinary 21B (Ephesians 6:10–20)

Gird yourself with the T-shirt of righteousness, the backpack of faith, the hoodie of salvation.

by Katie Hines-Shah in the August 2024 issue
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It's back-to-school season, and many children (and some adults) are laying out their wardrobes with care. New blouses and slacks. New polos and shorts. New backpacks and hats. And of course, new shoes. New shoes are the most important part. Just ask Alexander in the beloved children's book *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, who chooses "blue ones with red stripes" but when the store is all sold out is forced to accept "plain old white ones." Alexander's mother may buy the white shoes, but he gets the last word: "They can't make me wear them."

It makes me think of Ephesians. This week's reading contains one of the best-known metaphors in the Bible. The Christians of Asia Minor, to whom the letter is addressed, were all too familiar with military clothing. Roman soldiers were a ubiquitous presence, and at their hands Christians experienced regular harassment. It is tempting to read the armor of God as a call to arms, yet the author of Ephesians is clear: the warfare he references is spiritual.

Modern American perceptions of "this present darkness" may tend toward the apocalyptic, a result of Frank E. Peretti's 1986 runaway bestseller of the same name. But this is a limited perspective. "Spiritual forces of evil" are present in mundane human life. Racism, sexism, homophobia, greed, destruction of the environment, lack of concern for human life, failure to do the good that is within us—these are forces of evil, from the classroom to the boardroom. Faithful Christians need to gird themselves against them.

The "whole armor of God" metaphor is rich in possibility. Note that armor is a defensive—not offensive—tool. Comparing the Greek used in Ephesians and in other ancient war texts can be an interesting exercise. A few examples: The *thyreos* is a two-by-four-foot hide shield capable of withstanding flaming arrows and protecting

warriors from spear attack—but only if the holder keeps his cool and holds it up. The helmet of salvation may be as much for protection as identification, based on a close read of the *Iliad*. The *macharia* is a short sword or dagger, primarily used in hand-to-hand combat. (What might it mean that the only offensive weapon listed can only be used in close proximity to an enemy?) It is easy to update terms for a modern audience and extend metaphors from there. A high schooler might identify with a new set of analogies: the T-shirt of righteousness, the backpack of faith, the hoodie of salvation. The word (*rhema*, not *logos*) still stands in for a sword, even if that word is found on a tablet or Kindle.

And then there are the shoes.

At first it seems like right in the middle of the metaphor the writer ran out of steam: “As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the Gospel of peace.” Perhaps this longer reflection, translated as a full sentence in English, centrally located in the passage, is the real key to the whole reading. Breastplates and swords aside, the battle against evil forces may rest on shoes. When walking was the main form of transport for troops, shoes could make or break a battle or even a war. One can only imagine what Hannibal’s army, elephants and all, could have accomplished with cleats.

Of course, just as the warfare is spiritual, so is the choice of footwear. The writer of Ephesians knows that any shoes can be used for peace. They can be loafers or heels, sneakers or sandals, moccasins or ballet slippers. They can even be combat boots. What matters isn’t what shoe is worn but the intention of the wearer. It’s up to the individual to decide what shoes they are wearing on any given day.

Alexander is right. No one can make you wear peacekeeping shoes. As Christians head off to school or work, the PTA meeting or the gym, they get to decide how to clothe themselves. The author of Ephesians knows that choosing the “whole armor of God” is no easy task. “Pray,” he writes, “keep alert,” and ask for help from “all the saints.” There is a benefit for those who choose to do so. By putting on the Spirit, and by the grace of God, it might be possible for the Christian to accomplish more than her outward clothing might suggest.

In one more metaphorical twist, the author of Ephesians, presumed to be Paul, calls himself not a prisoner but a *presubeuo*—an imperial legate or ambassador. His chains, in this vision, are not the mark of someone having a no good, very bad day

but rather the sign of his ultimate authority. The reader knows that Paul does not face his challenges unarmed but bears as his message the sword of the word, the mystery of the gospel itself.

Christians are not just students and teachers, bosses and workers, stay-at-home parents and retirees. They are also imperial legates, ambassadors bearing the message of the gospel. The whole armor of God can enable them to overcome “rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers.” But they must decide if they will put on such armor for the battles of daily life, peacekeeping shoes included.