

“God’s BDU” GPPC 8-26-18
Psalm 84, Ephesians 6:10-20

During my three, sometimes happy, years in the U.S. Army, I discovered what I’m sure you already know; military personnel have different outfits for different occasions. For the most formal of occasions, we wore our dress blues. I’ll admit they’re not as snazzy as the U.S. Marines’ dress blues, but they’re still pretty nice. Sorry, Navy and Air Force—you’re not even in the conversation.

For less formal occasions, we were ordered to don our Class A Greens with or without jackets, depending upon the temperature and the occasion.

And then for the least formal occasions, times when we might actually be out in the field (not something we did much after basic training) or (much more likely) when we were cleaning toilets, mopping, waxing, and buffing floors, or mowing grass, raking leaves, and picking up trash, we wore BDUs. BDU, as some of you know, stands for Battle Dress Uniform. It was a camouflage outfit you’d wear with a hat and spit-shined boots. BDUs were good for when you might need to get

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sweaty or dirty or be out in the elements or, heaven forbid, have to go to war. (Footnote--the U.S. Army has replaced Class A Greens and BDUs with new uniforms. Time marches on and we change for a new day.)

Of course, the key for military personnel was to show up wearing the right outfit for the occasion. For example, if you didn't check the muster schedule and showed up for formation wearing dress blues when it was a BDU day, you'd be in some trouble. You had to pay attention and wear what was appropriate for the day.

The right outfit for the day—that's what the writer of Ephesians has in mind, you know. The writer himself was probably a student of the Apostle Paul. Originally he wrote to the Christians in Asia Minor in the 2nd century A.D. One scholar says, "They were religious minorities in the Roman Empire. Christianity was illegal until 313... [So] these Christians faced daily harassment and discrimination from their neighbors and possible suppression by the authorities. If they were in fact in Ephesus, they may have been taken to worship the emperor at the newly constructed temple of Domitian to test their allegiance." (Haruko

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Nawata Ward in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3*, 374 and 376.) Let's just guess that meeting did not go well.

It's a good reminder, isn't it? Christ, not any secular leader, Christ is Lord, and faithfulness to Christ will sometimes require the church to be out of step with the dominant culture, speaking God's truth to every emperor and would-be emperor. And faithfulness to Christ will always have a cost. Are we ready to pay the price?

So the writer of Ephesians tells us we need to wear the right outfit for the day. He says, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power." Notice that right away he declares our ability to say and do what we need to say and do will not come simply because we reach deep down within ourselves and find our second wind or channel good vibes. No. "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power" he says. The strength and power of the Divine One who spoke galaxies into being and poured life into the universe is available to us as we ask in faith. It boggles the mind, doesn't it?

We'll need that strength and power. Why? Because we're going into battle. "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to

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stand against the wiles of the devil,” he says. “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

The writer says we’re going into battle and it’s going to be messy and difficult. So we need to put on God’s BDU, God’s Battle Dress Uniform, the “whole armor of God.” Because we’re going into battle against the devil.

So let’s review our enemy, the devil, Satan, evil—whatever name you prefer for our old foe. Of course, in popular imagination the devil is a guy with horns and a tail or the devil is some sort of creature who can change from looking like a human being to looking like a scary monster. Think of the devil as blue jeans clad Randall Flagg in Stephen King’s novel *The Stand*. Or more pleasantly think of the devil as actress and supermodel Elizabeth Hurley in the movie *Bedazzled*. If only!

But the Bible and the Christian faith have a few core convictions about the devil. It is a force that opposes goodness and God, and diminishes human life and God’s creation.

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The devil is attractive and deceptive. Evil fools us by claiming it's delivering something good, even something "reasonable." Hitler did not sell war, destruction, torture, and murder to the Germany people. No. He sold the notion that the German people were victims and they needed to reclaim who they were and what belonged to them not others. He sold the notion that the German people were "a master race" that would rule the world, and they needed to "purify" the country of anyone who was not of unadulterated heritage. And they needed to dispose of people who might have physical, emotional, or intellectual "defects." He sold the idea that others were responsible for the problems of the German people, and these scapegoats, especially the Jewish people, were a "problem" that needed to be fixed. And Hitler knew how to fix it with the concentration camps and gas chambers of "the final solution." And he sold all of this, little by little, to millions of Germans who were well-educated and who claimed to be Christians.

Evil comes claiming to be good and reasonable, promising to make things better or to return to a golden age, while looking for scapegoats, and finally delivering death and destruction. Beware, Christians!

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The devil is also incredibly powerful. As the writer of Ephesians puts it, we're up against "against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Evil infects not merely individuals, but communities, businesses, political parties, countries, even churches. And it is more than the sum of its parts. Like a California wildfire, it takes on an explosive life of its own. Do not be deceived; evil is stronger than you and I are on our own. We have no chance against evil on our own.

But, thank God, we're not on our own. In fact, the writer says the war against evil has already been won in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now we experience leftover battles from a war that has already been decided. So we live in the "already, but not yet" of the kingdom of God.

As we live in the "not yet" the writer tells us we're in a battle, but notice who we are *not* battling. We are *not* battling other people! Yes, people and their words, actions, and policies are what we deal with every day. But in reality, when people are engaged in evil they are

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merely witting or unwitting vehicles for the greater cosmic powers of darkness.

And this challenges us to walk a difficult narrow line. On the one hand, as Paul says we must “speak the truth in love” and seek God’s justice and mercy. As Christians we have a responsibility not only for battling against evil in our personal lives but also for speaking the truth in love, working for God’s justice and mercy, and battling against evil in institutions, in policies, and in attitudes.

The church has struggled and continues to struggle with that challenge. During the time of slavery in our country, and even afterwards during the Civil Rights movement, there were Christians who adopted a false doctrine known as “the spirituality of the church.” And basically this doctrine declared that the ministry of the church is simply to focus on individual salvation and individual morality. The church was to express no public opinion about the vicious system of slavery and then later on of Jim Crow laws.

Fortunately, this false teaching was eventually rejected decisively by Presbyterians in the North and in the South. But sadly you still hear

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remnants of “the spirituality of the church” thinking today as people reject church, especially corporate worship, because it speaks of “social justice” or sermons are dismissed and labeled “political” or “liberal” because they critique destructive public policies or the immoral behavior of public leaders.

Please understand. We Presbyterians are not rejecting private prayer and spiritual experiences. And we are not dismissing personal morality and individual salvation. But the Presbyterian Church believes that personal spirituality may not be divorced from working for God’s justice and mercy in the public arena. As the writer of Ephesians says, we’re up against the cosmic powers of this present darkness.

On the other hand, as we go into spiritual warfare we are not allowed to hate other people. We do not have to *like* everybody. But Jesus commands us not to *hate* other people. In other words, we’re not to wish for evil things to happen to others, or to do evil towards others. When other people are engaging in evil, we are to pray for their hearts to change, and we are to speak truth to them. But we are commanded not to think, speak, or act hatefully towards others no matter how terribly they

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are behaving or we think they're behaving. We're not allowed to hate. We're not to excuse the evil that people say and do, but we're also not allowed to hate other human beings, because they are not ultimately the enemy. They are actually instruments of something more monstrous than they are. And that monstrosity has already been defeated through Christ.

Speaking the truth in love, working for God's justice and mercy, but not hating people who are engaged in evil--this is a hard narrow line for us to walk, isn't it? And we fail to walk it sometimes, don't we? So we ask God's forgiveness, and we try again with the right outfit for the occasion.

The writer says we are to put on the whole armor of God. We are to put on a set of spiritual characteristics and practices that prepare us for spiritual battle. We'll need to wear truth, of course. As we talked about last Sunday, truth means that which is real, genuine, trustworthy, rather than illusion or wishful thinking. We are to wear truth, as in living as truthfully as we are able (nobody is perfect) and in seeking to discern truth and to reject lies, no matter how many times they are repeated. An

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early meaning of truth meant “hiding nothing.” So we, and our leaders, are to strive to live so that we don’t have to hide anything.

We’re to be about “righteousness” also translated as “justice” or “fairness.”

We’re to “proclaim the gospel of peace.” In other words, we are to be about God’s work of shalom which means not just the absence of war but the presence of wholeness and thriving for all people and God’s creation.

We’re to carry faith, a deep abiding trust in God, not merely in our limited efforts.

We’re to wear salvation and the word of God. So we go into spiritual warfare knowing that we are safe in God’s keeping and that we have the guidance and comfort of God’s word for us.

And finally we’re to be alert, persevering, and praying.

Do you see what the writer is describing? He’s describing Christian spiritual formation. That’s what happens in the church as we gather for worship, study, fellowship, mission, and social justice. When we come together as a church for worship and Sunday school, we are

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cooperating with God as God forms us as a people ready to engage in spiritual warfare. It's joyful and it's also serious business because we're up against the devil. So when you come to church it wouldn't hurt sometimes to imagine that you're gathering with other Christians to be trained and sent out to wage war not on people but on evil that diminishes human life. You and I are gathered, equipped, and clothed for spiritual warfare.

You know besides being gentle, Jesus was sometimes really tough and gruff. (It's in the Bible.) Can you imagine if he were standing here today considering the church, reviewing the troops? Maybe he'd say, "Alright people, move like you've got a purpose! Because, you see, you do." Amen. ©Jeff Paschal