

THE SIMPLE ACT OF GETTING DRESSED

Romans 13:11-14

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Prayer: *It was said of Dante: "He uses his language to discover the world anew." May the language of your Word in this service – both spoken in the sermon and visible in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper – lead us to discover anew the world you have created and redeemed for us in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

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Though the Bible is not a fashion magazine, clothing plays an important role throughout its pages.

- After the Fall, the *first man and woman* realize "they [are] naked, and they [sew] fig leaves together, and [make] *loincloths* for themselves."¹ A few verses later, the narrator says that God makes "*garments of skins*" and "clothes" them.² In this early part of the Bible, the clothing we wear, the privacy it provides, the shame it seeks to address, are presented as having both *human origin* and *divine sanction*.

As the generations pass from Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and his wives:

- Jacob's son Joseph receives a *coat of many colors* from his father, a symbol of his favored status as the oldest son of Rachel, the wife Jacob loved. Yet the coat of many colors becomes a source of jealousy and resentment on the part of Joseph's brothers. They throw him into a pit and sell him into slavery in Egypt – which is how the people of Israel land in this condition in which they will live for 400 years until Moses leads them to freedom.³ It all grows out of an article of *clothing*.
- And in one of the most heroic stories of the Old Testament, Queen Esther dons her *royal robe*, appears before her husband King Ahasuerus, and risks her life in demanding he reverse an edict of death he has signed toward Jews. Wearing the *royal robe*, Esther saves her people from genocide.⁴

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¹ Genesis 3:7.

² Genesis 3:21.

³ Genesis 37:1-36; Exodus 1:8-14.

⁴ Esther 5:1 and 8:1-17.

When we arrive at the New Testament, the *concern for clothing* continues:

- When John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, much attention is paid to his attire: “*camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist.*”⁵
- When Jesus sends disciples out, he tells them to “take no gold or silver or copper in [their] *belts*, no *bags* for [their] journey, or two *tunics*, or *sandals*, or a *staff.*”⁶
- In his most memorable teaching, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: “If anyone wants to sue you and take your *coat*, give your *cloak* as well.”⁷
- And as Jesus faces trial,
 - A young man flees into the shadows and loses his *linen cloth* in the process.⁸
 - Soldiers stationed at the foot of the cross gamble for Jesus’ *garments.*⁹
 - And when Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome arrive at the tomb in which the body of Jesus has been placed, they see a young man, “*dressed in a white robe*, sitting on the right side [of the tomb].” Dressed in white, it is he who announces: “He has been raised; he is not here.”¹⁰ Perhaps he is the young man, his robe restored, who had earlier fled into the shadows.

These Biblical references to clothing are intriguing, significant, and often metaphorical.

II.

In one of our passages for this First Sunday in Advent, the Apostle Paul uses *clothing* as a metaphor for being *ready to act*.

Our passage comes near the end of his letter to the Romans, which Paul wrote at the culmination of his ministry.

- The letter contains the longest and most dense theological argument in the Bible. It is Paul’s *magnum opus*.
- It covers the human need for *redemption*,¹¹ the way God addresses that need and *rectifies* the fallen world through the *death* and *resurrection* of Jesus Christ,¹² and the way Paul’s former kins-people – the people of Israel – *fit* into that redemption and rectification.¹³

⁵ Matthew 3:4.

⁶ Matthew 10:9-14.

⁷ Matthew 5:40.

⁸ Mark 14:51-52.

⁹ Mark 14:24.

¹⁰ Mark 16:1-8.

¹¹ Romans 1-3.

¹² Romans 4-8.

¹³ Romans 9-11.

- Nearly every major theologian and church leader – from Augustine to Martin Luther to Karl Barth – have spent years poring over Paul’s sophisticated argument. Their use of this challenging book has led to major turns in the history of Christianity, and indeed, in world history.

But in the last third of the letter, Paul sets aside the *dense, theological* character of his argument and focuses on what *we* as *human beings and followers of Christ* are to *do* as we live in the protracted *moment* between the *resurrection of Christ in victory* and his as yet to be enacted *return in glory*.

Every Christian since the first Easter morning lives in this moment. W. H. Auden called this time between *resurrection* and *return* “the most trying time of all,”¹⁴ for though we are *raised* to believe that Christ has overcome the world in the *resurrection*, our *experience* tells us, with Ecclesiastes, that

What has been is what will be,
And what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.¹⁵

We trust that what have here and now is *redeemed*, but we also know that what we have here and now cannot possibly be *God’s final intention for redeemed humanity*. The suffering and tragedy are too constant, too overwhelming. Thus, all we can do is await God’s ultimate will to be done, “on earth as it is in heaven,” but we do not control the shape or timing of that will. Hence, we wait. Advent waiting.

III.

In this intermittent time, like his Old Testament predecessors, Paul turns to a *metaphor of clothing* – the simple act of getting dressed – to call us to *focus* on what we face *each day* on this side of ultimate redemption, what we face unfolding before us. Paul calls us to *dress* and *act* in ways *faithful* to our *commitment* as Christians and *appropriate* to the time in which we live.

You know what time it is [Paul writes],
How it is *now* the moment for you to *wake* from sleep.

Paul is more robust in his hopefulness than we sometimes are wont to be:

For salvation is nearer to us now [he says]
Than when we became believers...
Let us then *lay aside* the works of darkness
And *put on* – get dressed in – the *armour* of light;
Let us *live honourably* as in the day...
Not in revelling and drunkenness,
Not in debauchery and licentiousness,
Not in quarrelling and jealousy.

¹⁴ W. H. Auden, “Epilogue” from *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1913).

¹⁵ Ecclesiastes 1:9.

Paul is saying that even though we don't know *everything* the day, the week, or even the era of human history in which we live will bring, we are to *wake up, get out of bed, and in the simple act of getting dressed, face the day and time with the wardrobe of our faith*. "You can do it," Paul says. "You can do it."

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I once heard the Reverend Jeremiah Wright remind his congregation on the South Side of Chicago

- That the Lord had *opened the eyes* of each of them that morning, when the eyes of many others around the world had not been opened
- That the Lord had allowed them to *get dressed* when so many other people had no clothing to wear
- That the Lord had allowed them to *eat a hearty breakfast* when so many others had neither food to eat nor shelter in which to eat it
- That the Lord had allowed them to *travel* to the Sanctuary in which they sit and pray, stand and sing, when so many others had neither transport nor mobility.

Every morning when we awaken, Paul says, we are awakened for a reason.

- The reason may be as clear to us as the child we hold in our arms and present for Baptism
- Or it may be as muddled as the "quarreling and jealousy" in our work or family – within and among nations of our world – we must address when we begin our day, as individuals, as God's people, as the human race.

But Paul reminds us that despite the limits of our clarity, we are to *dress* for the *duties*, the *challenges*, the *battles*, the *uncertainties*, the *complexities*, the *unpleasantries*, and the *celebrations* that await us. The simple act of getting dressed is a commitment to live *each* day, to face *each* situation, with the spirit of Christ and action that flows from that spirit.

IV.

Ever wise beyond any one sentence he writes, Paul does *not* tell us what to wear in this passage, other than to say: "Put on the *armour of light*."

Think for a minute: *Light* and *armour* don't necessarily belong in the same sentence, even the same metaphor.

- *Light* implies hope, beauty, illumination, insight, knowledge. We benefit from light but cannot hear it, taste it, touch it, smell it. It has no solidity to our senses.
- *Armour* on the other hand is solid as steel. It implies self-defense or aggression – force or the threat of force.

Is putting on the Lord Jesus Christ – *the armour of light* – putting on a *contradiction*?

This tension, this seeming contradiction, appears in other letters Paul or his close followers wrote.

- A writer who likely *followed* in Paul's tutelage expanded the imagery of "getting dressed" in the Letter to the Ephesians. This writer gravitated to the image of armour: "Take up the whole armour of God [this writer says]. So that you may be able to...stand firm."¹⁶ This writer moved from the generalized term "armour" to an entire military wardrobe: "The belt of truth around your waist...The breastplate of righteousness...The shield of faith...The helmet of salvation...The sword of the Spirit." This language is quite severe: even warlike. It shows that sometimes what we face is evil, powerful, destructive. Sometimes, the best we can do is stand our ground against forces greater than us. Sometimes we have to dress for battle.
- Yet another writer, *also following Paul*, writes to the Colossians of peaceful attire: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."¹⁷
- Likewise, in I Thessalonians, Paul *himself* writes: "Let us...put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation."¹⁸ Again, *mixed metaphors* involving what to wear in differing situations.

In the wisdom of these metaphors, Paul may be saying that some days we must be dressed for *battle* and *defense*, while other days for *peacemaking*. In some situations we must be poised to protect ourselves; other situations may call us to give of ourselves.

V.

So what exactly are we to wear: *armour* or *light*?

Let me venture this: Paul's only hint at an answer comes when he says: *let us live honourably, as in the day*.

Whether our action involves armour or light, battle or peacemaking, it must be such that at the right time, our action bears *the light of day*. If we are willing to let our action be *seen* or, at the right time, *known*, then our action is likely honourable. "*Let us live honourably, as in the day*."

So whether the clothing we wear be of light or armour, we must be willing to say, at the right time: "Yes, I did that, for these reasons." If we can say that, it is likely that our simple act of getting dressed has honoured God.

Amen.

¹⁶ Ephesians 6:13-17.

¹⁷ Colossians 3:12.

¹⁸ I Thessalonians 5:8.