



“Get Dressed!”
Rev. Bradley L. DeHaven
St. Andrew’s United Methodist Church
San Antonio, Texas
Sunday, August 27, 2006

Ephesians 6:10-20

Choices! Our world is filled with choices. To be sure most of our daily choices are not exactly life shattering or earth shattering. They’re simple, which route to take to our destination, the choice of a movie or a pizza topping or even an internet provider, but our choices have a way of multiplying and they confound us in such a way they become paralyzing. So many on such a heavy level, just go to the drugstore and try to pick out some toothpaste, you’re forced to make a half a dozen choices right off the bat. Do you want gel or paste? Do you want tube or pump? Do you want mint, icy mint or fresh mint or cool mint, baking soda perhaps, or sensitive teeth, whitening formula? It’s only toothpaste. It shouldn’t be so complicated. But look at the options that we have when it comes to food. It’s no longer enough when grocery shopping just to decide on a food, now you get to choose the shape that your food is made in. We have hamburger shaped pickles now. I don’t know how they can grow a pickle in the shape of a hamburger, but they do. Pineapple is now cut to look like stars and moons. Why we even have those cookies that are made in the shape of little teddy bears and I have to confess those have made it into our house. The details are endless. The sheer quantity of our choices is mind numbing.

At this time of year, college students are returning to campus and they face an onslaught of choices. Fairs, bulletin boards, ads, parties and invitations by countless groups who are encouraging them to sign up for their club or their organization or their project. This fall, activity fairs are shopping malls of possibilities. They are all bidding for the time and the energy of our students and they are simply a microcosm of the society in which we live in.

So far, you know I’ve mentioned only the most trivial of our choices. I’ve said nothing about the real decisions, the difficult decisions facing college students and all of us. Decisions about jobs, do I take this job, imperfect though it is in the hopes of at least getting a foothold into my chosen profession or my chosen field? What do I do when my dream job is five states away and I need to be uprooted? Do I leave family and friends and familiarity behind? What’s my decision when my job is not fulfilling and not satisfying or not affirming?

Then there are decisions about relationships. Do I open my heart and home to the heartaches, the joys, the complications of bearing and raising children? Will I say yes to adopting a child in need? As a parent, do I influence and do I balance my discipline with love and freedom and yet with limits? Decisions about caring for loved ones, decisions about everything. The list goes on. You know better than I do for you are living with those difficult decisions. You’re wrestling and sorting and considering all the options. You know all about a world that is filled with choices. It’s not as simple anymore as it once was or was it ever really?

You know it’s not as simple as I would like to have believed when I was a child. I used to believe that choices were easy. There was either the right choice or the wrong choice and every choice you faced, chose the right choice. But you know as well as I do there are times when it’s not that clear. As a matter of fact, sometimes just the virtue of telling the truth can get you in so much trouble as to be dangerous. Do I really look fat in this? That’s not an easy choice for anyone to make. How do we defend ourselves, especially when there’s danger, because the danger that comes when we trust in the wrong kinds of protection the wrong kinds of things? Our society is all about choices, isn’t it? It hits us as a barrage each and every day so we try to protect ourselves, we try to

shield ourselves, we try to armor ourselves, but what happens when we put our trust in the wrong armor?

I was reading an article in this month's Interpreter, a magazine for United Methodist programming, and they are reviewing because it is the September issue. They are reviewing because this is the fifth anniversary of September 11 and they had interviewed several folks who were in various places throughout the United States, most specifically those folks who were in either New York City or Washington, D.C. or in Pennsylvania in the rural communities. One of the folks that they interviewed was Rev. Terry Bradfield. He was a United States Army Chaplain. He was assigned to the Pentagon in September of 2001. The article says that in the rescue and recovery days following the attack he served on the chain of dignity. His post was inside the mortuary van. And when asked to give his own reflections of that time, he said, "I cannot make sense out of 9/11. I can't understand a soul that is connected to God in however God is described, thinking that that was the right thing to do. That day has unleashed such a sense of evil, of wanting to seek revenge, a huge anger that is not allowing people who are created in the image of God to reach into that reservoir of love and hope that should be our source and find solutions to the problems that we are facing now." He said, "I just would like for this day to be transformed into a day of peace instead of a day of savagery."

Choices, how we respond to the world around us? There is a way to defend our selves. It's not an easy way. It's the way that the writer of Ephesians put it. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His power. Put on the armor of God, not our own. Being strong is very simple. Sometimes we want to think of being strong as an instantaneous thing, it's something that happens all at once and then we move on, but the real tense of the verb here and the real intention of the writer is that to be strong is an ongoing thing. It's a lifelong pursuit. In fact in the original language it really was more of a statement encouraging strength, to be made strong in the Lord, to find our strength in that which is strength not in our own ideals and our own ideologies. To literally be made strong, strength comes not from our selves or own armor but from God, because what's going on right now in our world, what threatens us is not from human form. It may look like it on the outset but it's really not and the writer of Ephesians tells us very plainly. He says, "What our enemies are is not blood and flesh but rather the powers and the principalities behind them." In fact if you could read this in its original language he's talking about a cosmic battle that's going on in which we are caught in the middle. It's not our war but we are there nonetheless, and to be strong in that and to be strong in what's going on in our society which is trying to tear us down in every sense of the word. You know it's not one person. You can't blame it on one name. You can't put a face to it because it is bigger than that. It transcends our ability to understand and to truly... our limitations don't quite cover it. You used to believe that it was Madelyn Murray O'Hare. We could put a name to it. Folks, she's been dead now for several years and it is still going on.

It's not one name. It's not one person that is trying to tear down the faith of the church, the faith of the believers. It is cosmic. It's something far beyond our ability to understand. It's something metahuman and we cannot mistake what we read here is something from a by-gone era of Biblical history. It's not about something that just happened in Ephesus under Roman occupation. No, this conflict is one that's between that good and that evil and it occurs in every age including ours. It involves forces that surpass our own understanding and limitations and so whether we chose to depict those powers of good and evil in this way or we want to personify them in any other way, our text here in Ephesians reminds us that questions of morality should not be reduced to the level of human transaction. That's not about this. Good and evil serving simply as the sum total of individual actions. It's not about always choosing good when confronted with choice. No, today's text from Ephesians recognizes that the faithful Christian in every age may finally emerge as victor,

but make no mistake it will not come without serious, serious struggle and this alone should caution us against adopting some naïve optimism toward the critical issues that are facing us. We can't just say, well you know it's all going to be all right.

What's striking about this passage is that the author is giving us something profound. It's the armor of God. This is what God puts on, the things that God would protect God's self with in this wonderful horrible cosmic battle. The individual pieces of armor symbolize the qualities of God, not ordinary human virtues, God's truth, God's righteousness, God's understanding of peace, God's faith, and God's good gift of salvation, the world of God, the word of God.

It reminds us that it is not up to us to equip ourselves for battle. No. It's rather a matter of embodying within our selves those theological traits, those realities, those attributes that God uses to achieve this divine purpose within the world. That's what side we are on. That's where we are strengthened. We are not called to go into this battle. That's why most of these things that you hear about are defensive, not offensive, in fact the only one weapon that is offensive is the sword, the word of God, to cut away all that would be misleading and false. But the greatest thing in all of this is knowing that the battle is not ours, it's left to God. It's hard for us to imagine that. We want to water it down so much, we don't want it to get personal, we don't want to get so invested in it. We just want to think about it and not feel it and not participate in it. We have a habit of that as a people.

The writer, Mark Twain, once wrote that most people are bothered by those passages of scripture in which they cannot understand. He said, "No I have a problem with the ones that I do understand." He says, I suspect that at times we all would like to walk away from the church and never come back. We would rather prefer a God different from the one that we find in Jesus. Flesh and blood, yes, no problem with that, but demanding, no, no; resurrected, absolutely, but crucified, no; salvation, of course; repentance, no; love, yes; commitment, no. Unfortunately, you cannot have one without the other. The rose comes with the thorns and pain comes with birth and night comes with day, but the best of times can only be lived because there are those times that are so bad. To pretend that this battle is not important is to cheapen the faith and to be able to walk away from it.

This is not a battle that we can walk away from. As Christians we are called to defend our selves and the faith, but we are left naked, we are given that which is strength and the profundity of that strength cannot be measured.

The greatest gift that this writer gives to us, by the way, comes in the last three verses. The greatest piece of armor, the greatest protection we could have is prayer. He says, pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication, pray in the Spirit. He says to that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Please don't misunderstand that, we're not talking about those saints that are named that are icons now somewhere in some big cathedral. The writer of Ephesians is talking about the saints who were faithful, not the perfect ones. There were no perfect ones. Those who were faithful were the saints of the church in Ephesians time. Those saints who were faithful today are the ones we need to pray for always, because in praying for each other we find strength to persevere. Pray also, he writes, for himself. He says so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the Gospel. The tools that we have to protect ourselves, to defend against that which would tear us down are the very tools that God uses.

Brothers and sisters, it's time for the church to get dressed. It's time for the body of Christ to be a part of this world, not fortified, not centered away somewhere on a hillside by itself. Did you ever notice that fortresses, they don't move, they don't go out, they don't change anything around them, they don't change the landscape around them, they don't change the tenor of people around them, they don't affect the people around them, but the folks who are inside are protected some how. That's not what he's talking here. He's not talking about build a fortification around yourself and

never interact with the world. He is talking about being defended, protected by the gifts of God, the armor of God and the word of God.

Isn't it time that the church armors itself in the world and offers truth and righteousness and justice and peace? Isn't it time we get dressed? In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen!