It was the Sunday before Halloween and the grandkids came over for dinner as is our custom. Jack was dressed head to toe in his Spiderman costume and he was anxious to take his mom-mom into the front yard to show her all of his amazing skills. He jumped and ran and fought invisible foes in the front yard much to her amusement. As we gathered around the table for dinner I called on Jack to pray. “Hey Spidey, how about giving us a prayer today.” We took hands around the table and he bowed his head. “Thank you God for this food and for everything. And thank you for the super powers I’ve gained since putting on this costume.” Swallowing our laughter we all said Amen.

I know you are thinking right now of your own childhood and the fantastic, larger than life characters you portrayed; characters or persons who tickled your imagination and made you aspire to be faster, better, smarter, stronger, prettier, funnier, taller, and even older. Today we watch our own children and grandchildren play out a drama. There’s Emma as Jessie, Sydney as Elsa, Chloe as Princess, Abigail as Minnie Mouse, Tyler as Captain America, John as Stevie.

But growing older doesn’t necessarily mean that we “gave up childish things” like Paul (I Cor 13:11). We still like to dress for our part in the drama we call life.

It was Shakespeare who wrote “Clothes make the man”. Actually what Polonius said was “For the apparel oft proclaims the man.” It was also in the same discourse of fatherly advice to his son, Laertes, he said:
“This above all: to thine ownself be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.” (Hamlet)
Women, don’t feel left out though because there are innumerable web sites under the key words: accessories make the woman.

You are what you wear; or are you? If you are wearing a choir robe, you must be a singer. If you are wearing vestments or collar you must be a cleric. If you wear white pants and white shoes before Memorial Day, you must be a golfer. If scrubs, a nurse. If a uniform, a member of the Service. If you are wearing a yamaka, or kippot, you must be Jewish. If you are wearing a hijab, you must be Muslim. What is it we wear that identifies us as Christian? Is it the church clothes you are wearing today? Rayfield Stinson liked to dress “sharp” as he called it. You can see him on our Welcome postcard. One Sunday he had on a new suit with matching tie, silk handkerchief in his breast pocket, and matching shoes. While riding to church I said “Rayfield, you are looking especially dapper today.” He said, “I just want to look my best for God!”

Pastor Jason told us in his sermon “Christmas Clothes” (Colossians 3:12-17) that we have to put on new clothing. These garments, our baptismal clothes, include compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love. That was Paul’s advice to the Colossians. In the context of our text for today, these clothes would be our “under
armor”. He has a different message for the Ephesians when he says, “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”

Now, I must confess that this passage goes against my pacifist sensibilities. I did double check with Ray about the hymn selections for today because I wanted to be sure we were not singing “Onward Christian Soldiers.” He distressed me though when he told me I didn’t have to preach the sermon, I could just buy the armor. Sure enough, I found an on-line ad for the “Full Armor of God Play Set”. It reads: “Based on the spiritual warfare passage in Ephesians 6:13-18, this 7-piece play set will give kids the real feeling of suiting up in the armor of faith. The set is made of strong, durable plastic to withstand even the mightiest of battles! White with red accents, this costume armor set is made for either boys or girls. $29.99.” Lord, help us all.

The militaristic image here comes both from the scriptures like Isaiah that portrays God as the warrior king coming to bring justice, and also from Paul's background as a Roman soldier. We are constantly at war. As Jesus said “you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. (Mt 24:6) Paul warns us that our struggle is against “the cosmic powers of this present darkness”, in other words, against all things that do not reflect or promote the goodness and benevolent nature of God.

I believe the text is not so much a call to arms for a new crusade, as it is an exhortation to claim the promises of God. It is not about putting on a costume with super powers; it is about donning an attitude of holiness.

First, it is important to understand the background of this letter. Ephesus was a beautiful city in Paul's day, sometimes referred to as the City of Marble. In his day it lay on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and was a center of trade and commerce for the region. It was here that Priscilla, Paul, Timothy, and John furthered a powerful Christian witness and ministry. As you sailed into the harbor, one of the first sights that would catch your eye would be the impressive temple to the goddess Artemis, standing tall with 127 marble columns, each almost 200 feet high, and a statue of the goddess Artemis standing over 9 feet tall. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. (Ref: Travels In The Land Of Paul, copyright 2000, Rachel Coggins).

Legend has it that that a tribe of Amazon women founded the city on the site where the image of the goddess fell from the sky. The marble statue of the Lady of Ephesus can still be seen today at the Ephesus Museum. When Paul entered the city for the first time he found a prolific trade in jewelry and other gifts, as well as silver shrines to the matron goddess being offered to every merchant, king, ruler, tourist and pilgrim who visited the city. Can you imagine some unsuspecting shopkeeper greeting Paul and asking him, “Would you be interested in buying one of the shrines to our Lady of Ephesus?” His teaching against pagan and profane idols threatened a core business in the city. And you know what happens when the church threatens commerce.

You can read about the great town hall meeting in Acts 19 where the crowd shouted for two hours “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” The new Christians had to put on the
whole armor of God to prevail against the pagan worship and practice of magic. Meeting in caves outside the city to worship, pray, and teach they began to convert many believers in the Way. “A number who practiced the magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all; and they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily.” (Acts 19:19-20) Today a lone column of the once great temple can be seen standing in a bog, buried by silt and time.

In Ephesus, the temple was the symbol for the spiritual and celestial struggle between the power of darkness and light, good and evil, profane and holy, truth and falsehood. It represents the sin of all humankind, the sin of pride, and the temptation of Satan even to Jesus in the wilderness. We would be as god. No more than the early Christians in Ephesus, we cannot escape this cosmic battle and so Paul admonishes us to put on the whole armor of God.

“Fasten the belt of truth around your waist” or “Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth.” (KJV) During the first week of April a group called Us held a Dayton 24-7 Week of Prayer in the chapel at Omega Baptist Church. Christians gathered together for a week long prayer vigil to pray for our community, our city and our world. The group solicited people to provide security so that persons coming in the wee hours of the night would feel safe and they requested that no one carried firearms. The belt of truth doesn’t come with a sidearm but with prayer. It is not for lashing people about the head and ears to beat some sense into them. We stand on the truth that prayer matters! As Danny Millett was putting on the green jacket at the Masters this past week I noticed the belt he was wearing had a “V” on the buckle. It reminded me that we stand on the truth that God has the Victory!

“Put on the breastplate of righteousness.” Notice that Paul did not say the breastplate of self righteous. “God I thank you I am not like other people” was the prayer of the Pharisee. Jesus said it was the tax collector who prayed “God be merciful to me, a sinner!” who was justified. Paul’s testimony was “But by the grace of God, I am what I am.” (I Cor 15:10). Our breastplate is not tempered steel but tempered humility. We have no claim to being righteous except by the grace of God, who is our righteousness.

“As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.” Rayfield didn’t have a shoe shine stand; he had a shoe salon. His business name was “Celestial Shoe Styling. He didn’t shine shoes, he dressed shoes. When his business was at the Fairborn Holiday Inn he wore a tux. When he moved to the Crowne Plaza downtown he wore a suit every day, and replaced his coat with an apron while he was being about his business of dressing shoes. One Sunday he says to me, “I’ve been noticing that the pastors on the platform don’t look so good, their shoes look kind of scruffy. I have been praying to God to show me what I can do in service to the church and I think he just gave me an answer.” Well, Rayfield had the pastors bring him their shoes in a bag so he could take them home and dress them properly. Rayfield wanted to dress them to proclaim the gospel. “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of
the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces
salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns."

“Take the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of
the evil one.” Do we not want a shield against sorrow, adversity, loss, and pain? But the
one recommending the shield lived a life of hardship, physical pain, and martyrdom. The
Congregational minister J H Jowett summed it up in his book of sermons on the armor
of God. “We live in circumstances and seek a shield to make us comfortable; but the
apostle Paul lived in character and sought a shield to make him holy.” (J. H Jowett, The
Whole Armor of God, 1916) We do not live like other people who have no hope because
we have hope: our faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

“Take the helmet of salvation.” Are you familiar with the battlefield cross? Pictures of
Normandy Beach show the dunes littered with helmets perched atop a rifle. This was a
way of marking the spot of fallen comrades so they could retrieve the bodies later. More
recently at memorial services for fallen soldiers returned from the Middle East you will
see a helmet atop a rifle, with boots and dog tags as the base of the temporary
memorial. The helmet of salvation is a battlefield cross and it marks the cross on which
God gave up his son, transforming a crown of thorns into a head covering for us.

I am reminded of Daryl, a man in his mid thirties who had moved to the town where I
was a young pastor. He and his family had come in search of work a few months prior
and one of the deacons had given him a job at the truss factory. During the invitation
hymn on Easter Sunday Daryl came forward to make a statement of faith in Christ, and
to join the church. He insisted that he wanted to be baptized that afternoon in the local
river (creek). Mid afternoon I met Daryl at the river, accompanied by several deacons
and members of the church. He still had his Sunday suit on so I invited him to take off
his coat, tie, and shoes and to empty his pockets. Daryl responded by saying that he
wanted to be baptized with his suit on and wallet in his pocket, because “Jesus saved
all of me from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet.”

Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” The word of God is the only
offensive weapon on the list. Feeling weak? “I can do all things through Christ who
strengthens me.” (Phil 4:13) Feeling afraid? “I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod
and thy staff, they comfort me.” (Ps 23:4) Feeling unloved? “(Nothing) will be able to
separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:38) God’s word
speaks to us in our struggles, while the Spirit intercedes on our behalf to bring our
prayers to God.

Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the word of God: not just church clothes
but an outfit of holiness covering you from the top of your head to the bottom of your
feet, and it does no good hanging in your closet. Try it on; wear it well. Amen

Note: This sermon is inspired by and dedicated to the memory of Rayfield Stinson who
was an example to me of someone who wore the whole armor of God.