

It is the last Sunday of August, and the winds of summer are about to change. School has started, traffic has picked up as UGA returns, and we have resumed our two Sunday services.

We had a wonderful kick-off brunch two weeks ago, Sunday School started last week, and even though the weather may not feel like it right now, before you can say “pumpkin spice lattes,” we’ll be diving into Autumn leaves.

And with Labor Day just around the corner, temperatures and leaves aren’t the only things that will begin to change, but also closets.

Growing up in the South, you learn that there’s a strict protocol to be followed when it comes to fabrics and wardrobe, especially around Labor Day.

In one church I served, there were two elderly unmarried sisters who set the clothing calendar for the congregation.

Summer began when they started wearing straw hats, and the men knew they could begin wearing open collar shirts.

And yes, when the straw hats were replaced by felt hats after Labor Day, coat and ties were the appropriate church wear for the next several months.

I remember being told by someone that Labor Day is the deadline for getting one last blast of anything white, linen, or seersucker!

Even in biblical times, there was concern over what we wear, how we wear it, what it looks like, what it all means and how it matters as the people of God.

On one hand there’s what Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount not to worry about what wear, to just to look at the lilies of the field and how God cares for them.

But on the other hand, the Bible does give us instructions on what to wear and what not to wear because, as the people of God, the way we present ourselves to the rest of the world, does matter.

According to Deuteronomy 22, the Israelites were forbidden to wear clothing made of linen and wool together.

Levitical laws demanded that all cloaks have four tassels on them.

Isaiah 16 denounced women for wearing jingly jewelry, scarves, and perfume. Zephaniah prohibited wearing clothing from foreign cultures, and Timothy mandated that women keep their hair covered.

And even though the two passages we read today don’t refer to literal clothing that we wear, they highlight things that we should have in our closet; a wardrobe, if you will, that is both functional for all seasons and stylish, how we present ourselves as Christians to the world.

Let’s look first at the Ephesians text, where Paul uses the image of a soldier’s armor, something that the Christians of Ephesus would have seen every day as the Roman soldiers patrolled about the city.

He draws this word picture to illustrate how Christians should dress in order to stand against the forces of darkness and evil that come our way, to stand firm against the powers of injustice that prowl through our world.

First, there’s the belt of truth, which holds up the tunic, so the soldier can move about freely, to walk or run without getting tripped up by a bunch of extra fabric.

Putting on truth, that is, being honest with ourselves about ourselves: claiming and naming our peculiarities and imperfections, our weaknesses and struggles, being our true selves without pretense or self-righteousness.

Being true to ourselves and being true to God gives us a freedom to move through life without having to keep up appearances for someone else's approval which so often gets in the way of the work we need to do for the kingdom.

Next comes the breastplate of righteousness. It covers our vital organs. It protects our hearts.

Be righteous, the passage tells us.

Not such an easy task when all those around you are acting out of self-righteousness, self-absorption, but God wants us to do the right thing.

When we see an injustice, instead of turning away and pretending it's none of our business, stand up for those who can't stand on their own, speak for those who have no voice.

To put on the breastplate of righteousness is to put on right behavior, to act justly, to protect our hearts from the coldness of indifference and apathy taking over.

Then we have the shoes, and being the father of two daughters, I am very aware of how shoes are a very important accessory, and our scripture passage affirms that, especially when they are shoes of peace.

You need shoes if you're going to stand firm. Shoes with good soles and good arch support because working for peace is a long-term endeavor

It's going to take a lot of standing, and standing, and standing: standing tall for those living on the margins, put down, standing guard over those assaulted, abused, torn apart, standing with brothers and sisters proclaiming the gospel of peace.

Next, Paul tells us to take up the shield of faith. Roman shields were leather, drenched with water to protect against incoming arrows of fire, and large enough to cover the person carrying it and one-third of the person beside him.

They provided the most coverage when soldiers stood close together, each person's shield overlapping with the person next to them.

And so, our faith is strongest when we are connected, united, joined together to live our oneness, as said earlier in the letter to the Ephesians: "*...making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*"

Faith covers us like a shield: steadiness to hang on to hope in spite of our fears, openness to listen to other voices from other rooms in spite of their strangeness, and trust in a strength greater than our own, a power that is more than what we can generate by ourselves.

And when we share that faith, it protects those around us, too.

The helmet of salvation is worn on top, touching our foreheads, reminding us constantly of our baptism.

It reminds us of God's love for us before we were able to love, of what Christ gave for the forgiveness of sins, even though we are not even close to deserving of it.

Like the words we say before the passing of the peace, because Christ has forgiven us for all the times we have turned our back on Christ, for all the horrible things we have done to each other, so we can forgive one another, even when it is hard, even when it hurts our pride.

We are assured of our forgiveness and salvation through Christ, but we must also remember that Christ can forgive and save anyone and everyone; and that includes our enemies, and all those we would rather not include in God's love.

The final accessory to cap off the Ephesians 6 outfit is the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Proclaiming the mystery of the gospel, the word of God both cuts and soothes. It opens us up to our shortcomings but also carries God's love, mercy,

and forgiveness, a weapon of healing and peace as the Spirit puts to death what is evil and brings us to new life.

The Colossians text does not use quite the visual imagery of Ephesians, but it does give us some more spiritual style tips for what we should wear: compassion, kindness, humility, patience, forgiveness, gratitude, and most importantly, love.

If you're a visual person, as Paul's audience was, imagine as you are getting dressed each morning, what do you choose from your closet?

How are you going to be styling as a child of God, as a Christian, to the rest of the world today?

Because, the truth is, people are watching.

It's a Snap Chat, Instagram, Facebook, camera ready to take your picture anytime anywhere kind of world.

We live in a time where people question whether Christianity is relevant any more, or even worse, when people use Christianity as an excuse or a weapon to spread intolerance and ignorance and hate.

Unfortunately, those people are loud and very visible.

They grab the media's attention. They are what people begin to associate with when they think of Christians.

And so it matters what we put on each day; the image of a Christian that we project to the world.

With each article of clothing you put on, think about clothing yourselves with kindness, with gratitude, with faith.

Let those who see you each day, see the way you act, how you treat others, what you stand up for, let them see love.

Let them see humility and compassion and gratitude and truthfulness.

Those are the things that are always in style, and they look good on everyone.

So, long before those fashionista reality TV shows like "Project Runway" or "What Not to Wear" or "Fashion Police", we have some fashion tips from the Bible: a faith wardrobe for all seasons, if you will; what you choose to put on each day...

What's in your closet?

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.