7-18/19-20 Armor Up With Peace Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 2:1-20 Armor Up Series

Growing up I owned two pairs of shoes—tennis shoes for school and flats for church. Nowadays I have a few more pairs than that. I own flats and heels, sandals and tennis shoes. My husband also owns hiking boots and golf cleats.

Different occasions call for different shoes. Would you wear high heels to run a marathon? Would you wear boots to visit the beach? Flip flops are not practical for hiking in the woods. Cleats are not the best choice for walking around indoors.

Today we are invited to put on our feet whatever shoes will make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. When I think of that literally, I think of tennis shoes and work boots to serve the community around us, and I think of the flats and heels that I wear to proclaim God’s Word in worship.

Paul, however, is not talking about literal shoes or literal armor here. Instead, he is talking about a willingness to put on God’s armor, God’s characteristics that guide us to stand strong in the strength of the Lord against all that surrounds us.

Today, Paul is inviting us to be ready to armor up with God’s peace.

Ephesians 6 proclaims: -Eph 6:14-17 CEB

“Stand with the belt of truth around your waist,

justice as your breastplate,

and put shoes on your feet so that

you are ready to spread the good news of peace.

Above all, carry the shield of faith so that

you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one.

Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God’s word.”

Maybe it’s just me, but I have always found it ironic that the apostle Paul uses armor to describe a way of peace. Yet, isn’t that one of the purposes of any army, to keep peace?

Paul was experienced in the ways of the Roman army. The world into which Jesus was born, the world in which Paul proclaimed Christ crucified, was a world dominated by the Pax Romana, or the Roman peace. The Roman empire had conquered most of the known world at that time. There was an absence of war.

Yet Roman peace was not without conflict. Rome ruled with power and might.

Rome crushed any opposition through brutal killings and high taxes and terrorizing territorial rulers such as King Herod.

The Roman soldiers who kept this harsh peace wore shoes called caliga. They were thick, sturdy, hobnailed sandals that laced up the top of the foot to well above the ankle. They looked like a high-top leather sandal with a thick sole.

These sandals were durable, made not only for battle but also for travel. They were created for solid footing and quick movement. And since a hobnail is a literal nail in the sole of the shoe, imagine the terrifying sound made by a legion of Roman soldiers marching on cobblestone in their hobnailed sandals. Intimidation was part of their armor, to keep a forced peace.

When Paul invites us to armor up with whatever shoes will make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace, he is not asking us to put on whatever will intimidate another into listening. A forced peace is no peace. A bully pulpit does more harm than good. Demands will get us nowhere.

Remember, this armor of God is defensive in nature. It assists us in standing firm in faith, not attacking others with our convictions. It also assists us in stepping out in faith, confident in the One who calls us to share the good news of Jesus.

So the shoes we are called to wear as God’s armor in our lives, are the ways of God that help us stand firm and step out in faith, living by and sharing God’s peace.

Look around you—we live in a world that yearns for peace.

Peace between warring countries. Peace between divisive leaders.

Peace with those around us. Peace within ourselves.

We long for these words of the Gospel of Luke to come true, when the angels proclaimed to the shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth:

 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,

 and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (Lk 2:14)

We yearn for the peace that is the absence of conflict. The end of war. Peace on earth. Goodwill to all.

Yet, when we are honest with ourselves, we recognize that world peace cannot happen until there is peace within us, within our hearts and minds and souls. And inner peace can only happen when we put on God’s peace, when we welcome the gift of God with us and within us.

God’s peace is the gift of God with us that shines hope in the midst of our brokenness, that offers comfort in the midst of our struggle, that seeks reconciliation in the midst of division. God’s peace is the gift of God with us regardless of our circumstances. This is the peace we are called to armor up with today—the good news that God is with us!

So what better Scripture story to proclaim and show this good news than the story told every Christmas Eve, the story of the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us!

Instead of focusing solely on Jesus’ birth this day, however, consider the ways that those around Jesus armored up with God’s peace. How did their trust in God help them to stand firm and step out in faith? How did they live by and share God’s peace?

Joseph and Mary’s story of armoring up with God’s peace started months before Jesus’ birth. Both Mary and Joseph had to trust that God was with them and guiding them when they received mind boggling news from angelic messengers.

Mary trusted God’s messenger who proclaimed that she would be the mother of the Messiah even though she was a virgin. Joseph trusted God’s messenger who encouraged him to take Mary as his wife and claim the child as his own, even though the law dictated that she be stoned to death.

They both learned to stand firm in God’s peace and presence when the community around them censured them in disbelief.

Then Joseph had to trust God to guide them as they literally stepped out in faith, first to Bethlehem for the required Roman census, then to Egypt to flee the wrath of King Herod, and later in their return to Nazareth.

Time and again, Joseph and Mary had to rely on the strength of the Lord even in the midst of challenging circumstances.

The “shoes” that helped them be ready to proclaim the good news of God’s peace was their trust in God’s presence and their willingness to follow where God led them.

The shepherds’ story of armoring up with God’s peace began with a simple faith in God’s covenant faithfulness. They trusted the words of their ancestors, that God cared for all people, God was faithful to God’s promises, and one day all would be redeemed.

When the angels told them the good news of Jesus’ birth, they stood firm in their belief in such good news. Even though they were considered outcasts in society, they trusted in God’s peace enough to step out in faith. First, they visited the baby in the manger. Then they told Joseph and Mary what they had seen and heard. Finally, they told any who would listen the good news of the newborn king.

The “shoes” that the shepherds wore that helped them be ready to proclaim the good news of God’s peace was their belief in God’s Word and their willingness to share what they had heard and seen.

Our Scripture today is the beginning of Jesus’ life on earth. Three months ago, we spent the season of Easter reflecting on the end of Jesus’ life on earth, and Jesus’ resurrection appearances to his disciples.

The night before Jesus died, he offered one last gift to his disciples.

In John 14:27 Jesus declared, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you.”

On the day of Jesus’ resurrection, he appeared to them behind their locked doors

and reminded them of that gift, declaring, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (Jn 20:21)

Jesus’ disciples armored up with God’s peace when they recognized Jesus was still with them, although in resurrected form. Jesus’ disciples armored up with God’s peace when they trusted that the one who was crucified was now risen.

Their faith journeys took on new meaning, as they were transformed by the power of the resurrection. For the rest of their lives they stood firm in their faith in a crucified and risen Savior and Lord. Following Pentecost, they stepped out boldly in faith, proclaiming through word and deed the good news of Jesus.

The “shoes” that the disciples wore that helped them be ready to proclaim the good news of God’s peace was their conviction that Jesus was God’s Messiah, sent to redeem and transform the world.

Rev. Matt Rawle describes the power of the peace of God with us, and how such peace transformed the early disciples. Reflecting on Jesus’ words of ‘my peace I give you’, Rev. Rawle wrote:

Jesus isn’t just wishing them peace. He isn’t just offering a blessing for peace. …

He is offering a part of himself. He is leaving them a part of who he is as a way to help them through their troubled times. …

That same Jesus was able to sleep on a boat in the middle of a storm. He showed these disciples how to be calm amid the storms of life and how to settle the waves and wind with just a single word. He was giving them that peace from within himself.

That same Jesus was able to stand up to those who were finding fault with him, challenging him in public, and seeking to undermine everything he was trying to do for good.

He showed them how to speak up without shame, to walk through the crowds without fear, to stand up for what is right, and even to forgive his tormentors as he was on the cross. He was giving them that peace from within himself.

That same Jesus was able to stare death squarely in the eye at the graveside of Lazarus and at the bedside of Jairus’s daughter. He spoke a word of comfort to grieving and a word of hope about the Resurrection. Jesus was giving them that kind of peace, the ability to name your grief and acknowledge your loss, and to know that death is not the final word.

That same Jesus drew together, shaped, and empowered a group of ragtag disciples, drawn from all walks of life, from various political perspectives,…

He was giving them that kind of peace, that ability to unite together on the one thing that mattered most: serving one another in love.

And you know what? Jesus is giving you [and I] that same kind of peace as well.

 -Matt Rawle “Altogether Christmas” p.25-26 Abingdon Press

Like those who have gone before us, we are called to armor up with peace, to trust in God’s presence with us, and to put on whatever will help us to share the good news of Jesus.

What helps you to live and share the good news of God’s presence? Is it knowing God’s word and having confidence in God’s promises? Is it knowing you are not alone, but part of a community of faith seeking to love God and love neighbor?

Is it a life grounded in prayer and holy habits? Is it a life ready to serve others?

Whatever “shoes” you need to wear today to be ready to proclaim the good news of God’s peace, put on that armor of God, stand firm in faith, then step out to share the love and hope and grace of Jesus.

Step by faithful step, may we share through word and deed the good news of God’s presence with us.

In closing today, I could not leave without some Christmas hymn reference. Phillipps Brooks wrote the words to O Little Town of Bethlehem in the late 1800s. Yet his final verse is a timeless prayer that I offer up on behalf of all of us today.

“O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;

Case out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!”