

“Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light.” That is how we begin our Collect of the Day today, this First Sunday of Advent, this first day of a new Church Year, this first day of our season of preparation for the Coming of Christ. That imagery of casting away works of darkness and putting on armor of light kind of sets the tone for the day today, it even sets the tone for the whole Advent season—in fact, the old Prayer Book specified that this collect could be said not only today, but before the Collect of the Day every day in the whole Advent season during Morning and Evening Prayer. That imagery of casting away works of darkness and putting on armor of light captures a key theme of what Advent is all about.

And I have to admit that phrase in particular has fascinated me for years, ever since I was a kid, ever since I listened to my father intoning the words of the service in Grace Cathedral in Menominee, Michigan, when I knew I didn’t always understand everything the liturgy said, but I knew that the words were important and meaningful and filled with a powerful beauty. “Put upon us the armor of light”—what could that mean? I still ponder different meanings for that. The part of my imagination that is influenced by King Arthur and tales of epic heroes imagines the armor of light as magical weaponry, a suit of armor you could put on that would make you invulnerable to attack and invincible in battle. The part of my imagination influenced by esoteric studies imagines the armor of light as a sort of golden aura you could project into your etheric body, that would protect you from evil thoughts and ward off psychic attacks. The part of my imagination influenced by metaphysical poets imagines the armor of light as a complex metaphor, a metaphysical conceit, for the growth of the soul through militant spiritual disciplines. But my liturgical imagination suggests the armor of light may be something simpler: a symbol of strength, a metaphor for prayer. To put upon us the armor of light means basically to pray to be strengthened in our hearts. And I think it’s in that sense that the phrase from our collect and our readings from scripture help cast light on each other today.

The sense of prayer as something to armor and protect us is especially strong in our Gospel reading today. This reading is taken from Luke’s account of how Jesus teaches his disciples about the End of the Age and the Coming of the Son of Man. And the picture Luke shows Jesus painting is a pretty distressing and disturbing one. As Luke shows Jesus’ teaching, the world as we know it will be pretty much coming apart at the seams. “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,” Jesus says: there will be astronomical anomalies, comets and conjunctions and alignments that will bode ill for things on earth. I read not long ago that one of the things the Mayan calendar of 2012 is supposed to predict is an alignment of our sun with the galactic core, and that will, they say, produce a gravity anomaly that will pull the earth’s crust out of shape and cause horrendous earthquakes all over the planet; signs in sun and moon and stars are things that we still look out for today. There will be “distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves,” Jesus says: there will be meteorological disturbances, storms at sea and hurricanes and tsunamis, and the damage to shipping and trade and farming and economies will cause confusion and distress and rioting and war all through the nations of the world. It’s as if Jesus was saying “If you think Katrina was bad, you haven’t seen anything yet.” According to this teaching, the world as we know it will be coming apart at the seams—and in the midst of it, when things are at their very worst, Jesus says, the Son of Man will appear, with the clouds of heaven, with a nimbus of energy, with an aura of power that will command and judge and transform everything. And for that reason, Jesus says, it is important to be on guard, to be armored, to be alert, to be ready, so that the day of the Lord will not catch us like a trap. Don’t be “weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life,” Jesus says, throw away those works of darkness, and instead put on the armor of light, instead pray to have strength in the heart to “escape all these things, and to stand before the Son of Man.” As Luke presents it, Jesus calls us to pray for

strength, Jesus calls us to be armored with light, so that we may be protected from the evil and the danger and the destruction that are to come.

Luke warns us to put on the armor of light in order to escape something bad. But our scriptures this morning also encourage us to put on the armor of light in order to engage something good. That message comes in our Epistle reading, this passage from Paul's first letter to the Christian community in Thessalonika. Many scripture scholars say that 1 Thessalonians is the earliest letter of Paul that has come down to us—and that makes it the oldest book in the New Testament, the first glimpse we get into the formation of the early church around the teachings of Jesus and the travels of Paul. And one of the things that strikes me most about this early letter of Paul is the way he speaks of the love and affection he has for the Thessalonian community. I think a lot of people today have a sort of mental picture of Paul as a crusty, curmudgeonly, strict old ex-Pharisee, who took the simple teachings of Jesus and turned them into a rigid and oppressive system of theology. Now personally I've never felt that way about Paul, and I think 1 Thessalonians is a pretty good argument against that image. "How can I thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that I feel before my God because of you?" Paul asks. And "Night and day I pray most earnestly that I may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith," Paul says. That kind of language, about thanksgiving and joy and earnestly desiring to be face to face, was stock language in a certain kind of letter-writing in the Hellenistic world: that kind of language was used in love-letters, letters between husbands and wives, letters between lovers separated by miles—and here Paul is using that love-letter language for the Christians in Thessalonika. The way Paul puts it, that yearning in affection and love for each other is a hallmark of being in Christ, it is the sign of Christ's love in and through our love. Paul prays for the Thessalonians that Christ will make them increase and abound in that love, and that God will so strength their hearts in that love that they will be blameless "at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." So: being loving is what makes them blameless; and being strengthened in heart is what makes them loving; and prayer is what strengthens the heart; and praying for strength is symbolized as putting on the armor of light. We put on the armor of light, therefore, in order to be strong for love.

So if we put all that together—our collect, our Gospel, our Epistle—we could say that putting upon us the armor of light means praying for strength in our hearts, so that we may escape the dangers of sin and (more importantly) we may engage the work of love. And in the Advent season in particular, we pray for that strength of the heart, we put on that armor of light, so that we may be prepared in heart and soul and body to celebrate the presence of Christ when he comes. And what does all that mean for us? As Trinity Church, what work of love can we do to truly welcome Christ at Christmas? As individual believers, what will you do to put on the armor of light in your Advent season? Maybe it will be taking an ornament from the Giving Tree and going shopping for a family in need. Maybe it will be volunteering for the Christmas Eve Outreach Dinner and helping to create good food and warm fellowship for folks who might not have it otherwise. Maybe it will be undertaking a book study—maybe Shelby's book study on *The Return of the Prodigal Son*—and reflecting together on God's love for us revealed in Christ. Maybe it will be adopting a prayer practice to center your spirit in a time when the culture around us seems to be in a constantly mounting frenzy until December 24, so that, instead of being frenzied, your Christmas can be a genuine celebration of love. Maybe it will be taking a break from wildly extravagant gift-giving and instead making donations to charities and agencies in honor of your family and your friends. Maybe it will simply be preparing the place within you where Christ can be borne, as Mary prepared the place within herself for Christ to come into the world. What will you do this Advent season to strengthen your heart for love—what will you do this Advent season to put on your armor of light? Whatever it is, let it be a way for you to live out our prayer: Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light, that when Christ shall come in glorious majesty, we may rise to the life immortal. Amen.