

Putting on Faith

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Ephesians 6:10-20

***“Put on the whole armor of God.”***

Perhaps like you, we watched a considerable amount of the Olympics – the track and swimming and gymnastics, but also the lesser-known, not lesser, sports. I loved watching the frantic speed of table tennis, the incredible skill of volleyball, the strange, indecipherable rules of handball and field hockey. And water polo just felt like underwater wrestling. I am still not sure about events like beach volleyball or skateboarding, because I’ve played the first at a family picnic and done the second in my driveway as a kid. But who am I to say? There is much serious reflection to be done about the Olympics – mental health, sexism, racism – but for now, I am grateful for the extraordinary athleticism and the perseverance of the competitors in the face of extreme pressure, including a global pandemic.

After the Olympics, however, we were left with a void. And we filled it – at least partly – with Marvel movies, in particular Ironman I, II and III. It had been a while. They are not great, but OK, and sometimes clever, and entertaining, even with convoluted plotlines.

The premise – if you don’t know – is that a rich billionaire playboy/technology genius named Tony Stark is kidnapped, and in his captivity creates both the persona and the apparatus to become Ironman. In the Marvel universe, I lean toward Captain America, and truth be told I am primarily a Batman guy. Still, Ironman undergoes transformation over these movies, from a self-serving, wise-cracking stereotype, to a conflicted, morally compromised stereotype to a self-aware, even sacrificial stereotype.

As he is transformed on the inside, he is transformed as well on the outside, from inhabiting a clunky costume to a sleek one, from low-tech (for him) to high-tech.

And, of course, after many misfires, he gets the girl and saves—repeatedly saves—the world.

***“Put on the whole armor of God.”***

As I said, what begins as a clunky iron costume becomes sleek and colorful and high-tech. At first, he awkwardly climbs into it; later, with a wave of the microchip-imprinted hand, it comes to him—helmet, arms and legs, along with the ability to fly and shoot things from his hands.

Well, that’s WAY WAY WAY too much about Ironman. But with the movies fresh in my head, I thought about Ironman as I read Paul’s words to the church at Ephesus, including his admonition to put on the whole armor of God. I thought about Ironman’s costume as I recounted the last 20 years of our history in Afghanistan, including debates about properly outfitting soldiers for those conditions, the literal armor needed. I am hopeful that over time this fall we can have a discussion about that—not armor so much—but about war and faith.

I thought about Ironman, tangentially, anyway, as I thought about armor—a form of protection—and another debate raging right now. It’s probably not entirely on point to think of a face mask and a vaccine as armor, but each is a form of protection and defense, and the fact that we are debating that at all right now as people continue to get sick and die saddens and concerns me, and some things more than that.

***“Put on the whole armor of God.”***

It is a familiar image from Paul. And I want to embrace it. But I also want to qualify it, or if not quite qualify it, then do a deeper dive into its implications, and reframe his understanding for this moment.

For many years my spouse worked for the Salvation Army, a church founded in the rough streets of London when it was deemed that the more traditional churches were not doing enough to serve the populations with greatest need, that, in fact, an army was needed to fight social ills.

And you might remember debates about the hymn “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” which last appeared in a Presbyterian hymnal in 1972, and has us marching off to war, with the cross of Jesus guiding us.

And you know about the crusades, of course, that mixed history at best, and what it means to be a crusader. Just recently Valparaiso University, a good Lutheran school just outside Chicago, dropped the team name “Crusader” because hate groups have adopted it. Still, the legacy is out there.

War and warrior language has long been with us – from Paul, from our tradition. What do we do with it now? What are we battling? What needs our defending? From what do we need protection? What’s the purpose of this armor?

Paul knew the challenges and struggles of faith, of following that same Jesus. Paul, who had done the persecuting, was now being persecuted for his faith, imprisoned. He also knew that the message of Jesus would be a tough sell in a world already filled with faith options and not necessarily looking for more, and a faith aimed primarily at outcasts and misfits, a faith aimed at challenging and changing the status quo.

In Paul’s mind, then, armor was needed. *“Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”*

In Paul’s mind, the battle was joined on two fronts. He wrote: “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Paul saw those earthly powers, the powers of this earth, rulers, governments, royalty – and, might we add now – economic powers, as manifestations of deeper spiritual evil. We might not think about it this way, but we know what this looks like – when the powers of economics and politics converge to make evil manifest – in Jim Crow laws, in environmental exploitation, in a pandemic of gun violence. Earthly power combined with spiritual force to create very real evil.

And Paul tells us that we need to “stand firm” – his words – stand firm to battle this evil. He uses familiar imagery that still rings true. “Take up the whole armor of God.” We need truth – truth, not an opinion based on fear gleaned from social media, but truth, the truth that marches on, and then to wear that truth like a belt. And a breastplate – we can imagine that, from a gladiator movie or

something like that – a breastplate of righteousness. Righteousness based on justice, not coercion, not brute force or bullying, but justice.

And for your feet? I love this: “as shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.”

Perhaps you read the story of Allyson Felix, one of my Olympic heroes. Felix’s contract with Nike expired, and she was pregnant as she negotiated a new deal. She said Nike offered her a 70% pay cut in the new contract and failed to explicitly support requested maternity protections. She left Nike, a risky thing, and has now formed her own shoe company. “As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.”

Paul goes on, imploring us to wear the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit. We get the picture. We are a fully tricked-out spiritual soldier, a gladiator, a kind of theological Ironman with every piece of protective equipment – truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation – to protect us and defend us, undergirded by the word of God.

PHEME PERKINS writes that Paul “...creates a striking visual image: the Christian standing as a fully armed Roman infantry soldier against assault, flaming arrows thrown down from above...” Paul, PERKINS writes, equates an “armed soldier” with a “secure believer,” battling the “hostile powers (that) still govern the present age...”

But there are difficulties with this striking imagery as well, Beverly Gaventa writes. “...tragically, the church’s history of aligning itself with various empires makes it difficult to hear this passage afresh.”

So then, to that armor, and its purpose. Armor, it seems to me, is a defensive tool. It protects, it defends. And perhaps we need those things – protection from the slings and arrows of life, the personal disappointments, the unwanted health diagnoses.

Or more broadly – protection from pandemic or real war. Imagine yourself a Haitian facing another earthquake or an Afghani woman living in a devastatingly brutal moment. You need defending. You need protection. Literally.

Paul's spiritual language shouldn't detract our attention from these very real things. The world is not our enemy, our combatant. We are called to engage the world, not fight it but neither to withdraw from it.

Paul's imagery works, inasmuch as we remember that. Inasmuch as we understand that Paul is talking about a kind of spiritual power – not worldly power, not economic or political or military power. The power of faith. Faith that is often portrayed as weakness, but it is not.

Gaventa writes that our strength is derived from God's strength. We are not strong out of our own resources, she suggests. We are made strong, we are empowered, in God's power. That armor Paul imagines is best used for "believers...to defend themselves and their faith against the enemies of God; the battle itself is left to God."

Because we need to remember, even in these few verses, that while Paul portrays himself as an armed soldier, he is at the same time the bold martyr, the one imprisoned for his faith. He relies on the gifts of faith – truth, righteousness, salvation, peace – to persevere in the face of that hardship, and every hardship. These are the tools, the gifts, we have been given, and through which we engage the world. Without them, we lack protection, we are defenseless. But we are not left without.

Still, I am not sure what to do with this military, violent imagery. I know it exists throughout scripture, and I know our past has included faithful adaptations and tragic, sometimes departures. I leave it to you to embrace or reject or adapt. But at least consider.

Whatever your response, know that the values that imagery represents – peace and righteousness and truth and everything else – are vitally needed by each of us and all of us as we seek to live lives of faithfulness and hope, deeply engaged with a world whose forces seem so strong.

And Paul tells us to do one more thing. Keep alert. Keep alert. Who knows what may be coming? But in whatever ways we put faith on, and whatever forms that faith takes, that is our calling – to be alert, to be ready, and to trust the God in whose power and strength we abide, even now, for such a time as this. Amen.