



First United Church of Oak Park

The Armor of God

Ephesians 6:10-20

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¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² 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. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Put on the armor of God. You don't have to tell me twice! Where is it? I would wear it every day. The armor of God; that sounds powerful, impenetrable, like it can protect you from anything. I mean surely God's armor could protect me from all kinds of physical harm, but also emotional harm or mental distress. Just imagine, no more aches or pains, no more hurt or suffering, or worry or stress, yes, take my money! I would give anything for the armor of God, wouldn't you?

When I read this scripture for the first time to prepare for this sermon, I had a powerful vivid image come to mind: Wonder Woman. When I read this scripture aloud a moment ago, maybe a similar image was evoked for you; maybe you were reminded of a film or show or other pop culture figure. Because this passage is full of powerful language and illustrations, it is easy to conjure in our minds that which embodies what is described in this scripture to us, and for me that was Wonder Woman. Princess Diana of the Amazons, daughter of Zeus, wields a lasso of truth, similar to the belt of truth in this scripture; it also talks about a breastplate, a shield, a helmet, a sword, all of which Diana wears and together make a complete set of armor for a warrior, soldier, defender, or protector.

I look at the world around us, I see suffering of all kinds: devastation by natural disasters, senseless violence inflicted by humans, fear of and chaos around authorities in power, struggles with addiction or mental illness, families separated, terminal diseases claim the lives of loved ones. And I wish more than ever for the kind of armor that is described in this passage to provide protection and strength for so many people who are vulnerable and for all those who have experienced loss or hopelessness.

But even Princess Diana, descendant of the Greek God's, Wonder Woman, is not impervious to loss, even with the skills she has and the armor she wears.

I myself wasn't raised on comic books and wanted to know more about the origins of one of the only well-known female superheroes, so I did some googling. I have learned that the origins of Wonder Woman are truly fascinating and empowering and might make for a great illustration in a future sermon. But it was Gal Gadot's portrayal of Wonder Woman in the 2017 film that I am focusing on today.

Diana was raised learning how to fight, how to wield weapons and be a protector for those in need. Throughout the story, Diana is guided by her morals of truth, courage, peace, and belief of goodness in all people. What she comes to find is that humans are far more complex than she knew.

But we know. We know how complex human beings are. We are not perfect; each one of us has brokenness, but that does not mean we are broken. We do not always make the right decisions, but our mistakes do not have to define who we are. In the film, Diana puts it like this, "inside each person is light and darkness, it is a choice that each must make for themselves."

In the superhero world, there is always war and violence happening. And how do the heroes combat this violence? With more violence! It always results in a stand-off of who has the greater strength, but that just perpetuates a vicious cycle that we all know too well, as we have seen history repeat itself again and again. In that way, I find Wonder Woman to be refreshing, a kind of 'anti-superhero-hero' because all she wants is for the fighting to stop, for the war to end. But she learns that war cannot end war, it cannot save the world; only love can do that.

Although I am pleased to see a role model in film and mainstream media that embodies these values and ideas, especially a strong female, it is important to look to real life examples and there are many notable people throughout history who also believe that violence is not the answer, that war will not end war, that love is more powerful than hate. The most prominent figures that come to mind might be Ghandi or Martin Luther King, Jr., but in preparing for this sermon, I came across a name that was unknown to me: Bayard Rustin.

Bayard Rustin was a Quaker, meaning as part of his religious beliefs he was a pacifist, but he was also a gay black man who was born in Pennsylvania in 1912. He was a leader in social movements for civil rights, gay rights, and nonviolence who had been influenced by the teachings of Ghandi.

It is fitting that Bayard Rustin should be a part of my sermon illustration this week because on Tuesday, the 28th of August, it will be the 55th anniversary of the March on Washington, an event that Martin Luther King, Jr. himself described as "the greatest demonstration for freedom in American history." And who was one of the main architects behind that event? Bayard Rustin. He is the man who taught Martin Luther King, Jr. about Ghandi's teachings of nonviolence and helped show America what it means to protest peacefully.

An astounding example of this was during a Korean War protest, when Rustin was aggressively beaten with a stick. He responded by grabbing another stick, handing to his attacker, and asking him if he wanted to beat him with that stick as well. The attacker dropped the stick and walked away. This story sheds new light on Jesus's teaching of "turn the other cheek."

Bayard Rustin faced a lot of adversity in his life, to say the least. But he lived with a vociferous commitment to nonviolent protest because all people deserve to be equal and because love and peace are far more powerful than hate and violence.

John 3:16 says, “for God so loved the world that she gave her only son.”

This was God’s greatest gift to us, a gift of love in Jesus. The love we are shown by God is not deserved, it is a gift of pure grace and through this love we are equipped with the armor of God.

Armed head to toe with the love of God, we are tasked with waging an anti-war on the war of hatred and violence and inequality in our world. And we are equipped to fight this war with our superpower of blessing, a belt of truth, a shield of faith, a breastplate of righteousness, the gospel of peace, the sword of the Holy Spirit, which is the Word of God, and... love.

This armor of God will not make us invincible or impervious to loss or suffering; not even in the movie was Wonder Woman saved from experiencing the death of her aunt or her love interest, and she had special powers and special armor. But it has the power to lead us down a path of healing and wholeness where on the other hand, the armor of war guarantees further suffering and loss and little hope for a peaceful outcome.

Toward the end of our scripture it states, “Pray for me, I am an ambassador in chains, with a message of the mystery of the gospel. Pray that I may declare it boldly!” That mystery of the gospel is the powerful love of God, undeserved, unconditional, empowering love that when spread, not just by word but by our actions, has the power to truly be the armor of God for the world.

Jesus taught, preached, and embodied love and peace, he lived his life by these values. Pop culture is not the only place where we find heroes; Bayard Rustin is an example of what it looks like to be a hero and wear the armor of God and so can you. So consider yourself drafted, drafted as a disciple. Arm yourself with love and prepare yourself to stand your ground and wage war against hate. Amen.