

## Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

Kirby Lawrence Hill  
August 23, 2015  
Joshua 24:14-18  
Ephesians 6:10-20

### UNDER ARMOR

What visual comes to your mind when I say, ‘A movie set in the Middle Ages.’ How many thought of knights wearing armor? When I have seen those movies I have marveled at how heavy and cumbersome the standard plate armor must have been. The type of armor used in battle at different times and places varied based on what kind of protection was needed from the primary weapons of the day. What the author of Ephesians had been exposed to and had in mind in using armor as a spiritual metaphor was that which was worn by Roman soldiers, as New Testament documents were written during the midst of the height of the Roman Empire, and there was a presence of these soldiers throughout the Mediterranean region.

A soldier would wear a toga, held up by a belt, so the warrior would not be tripped up by the loose clothing. A breastplate covered the core of the body, protecting from an attack by arrows or swords. Shoes would be worn that would allow the soldier to move quickly across a variety of terrains. A shield would be held, a bit larger than was needed to protect the one who carried it, as soldiers would march together shoulder to shoulder with their shields overlapping to have the maximum protection from flaming arrows. A helmet was worn to protect from blows to the head. All of that armor was defensive in nature. Soldiers also typically each had a sword, which could be used for offensive or defensive purposes.

For an early church that felt like it was embattled or under siege, it was quite natural for this kind of armor to be used metaphorically in this epistle called Ephesians. Some Christians felt the threat of persecution that was taking the lives of people of faith. What was suggested as beneficial in their situation was not any kind of physical armor, however, because the physical threat was not the most serious one. What was suggested was that they put on a spiritual armor described toward the end of Ephesians.

In over thirty years of ordained ministry, I don’t recall ever preaching on this passage, in part because I am a bit nervous that such militant imagery can lead to a crusade kind of mentality that shapes our methodology. I grew up singing, “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before.” Of course that hymn used military imagery as does our text. But we do better understanding the purpose of that imagery if we look back through what came earlier in this letter to the early church. There is no interest in a literal Christian conquest. Neither is there any goal of dividing people into those to be loved and those to be scorned. In fact, there is great emphasis on reconciliation, the overcoming of barriers that divide people, religiously and otherwise. We also need to be reminded that the One who leads us is the One who teaches us to love and pray for our enemies, to turn the other cheek, and to forgive those who wrong us. This Christ agenda controls the armor imagery, rather than the imagery controlling the Christian agenda.

This armor imagery can help us come to grips with the reality that there are forces at work which stand in direct opposition to the good news with which we have been entrusted. We can put aside the notion that we won’t encounter challenges because we are children of God. There are those who view grace and love as an undesirable weakness. There is a lot of talk these days about building bigger walls to divide people or about bombing the hell out of those we view as enemies. There are destructive powers fueled by fear and hatred which are bigger and stronger than any one of us. But God provides us with certain gifts that don’t serve as an exterior armor to keep us untouched by any risk, but which make for an interior armor, an under armor that emboldens us to rise to the challenge before us. As a result, armor, which might be thought of as a symbol of self-reliance, is transformed into a reminder of our utter dependence upon God.

The nature of the illustrative armor suggested to protect us gives us a sense as to the nature of the threat we face as people of faith. The belt of truth would keep us from getting tripped up as lies and half-truths can do. Earlier in Ephesians, “speaking the truth in love” (4:15) was urged as a way to grow in Christ’s ways. Truth can be one of the first casualties of hate. Next mentioned is that which guards the heart, the breastplate of righteousness, where we realize our goodness is based on God’s gracious actions, not on our own. The shoes are those which enable us to move freely in order to share the good news of God’s peace, a peace that goes deeper than a lack of war, to the wholeness of relationships between humanity and God. The shield of faith can protect from assaults from those who think there is nothing larger than ourselves worth believing in, and a reminder that we are to go forward rather than just stay where we have been. The helmet of salvation imagined on one’s head reminds us that the saving nature of our God can protect the place of our thoughts that otherwise could take us off in all directions. The last item in the imagery is the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. It is not an instrument of hatred, not in the least. Rather, this item reminds us that Christians are called not just to endure and resist, but also to cut through the structures of injustice, the barriers that divide, making full use of the good news that comes from God.

To put an exclamation mark on how we are to rely on God, the author then talks about prayer, which goes beyond the armor imagery. Prayer for ourselves and for others, as we face the challenges before us, gives us the means for a constant searching for God’s power to be active in and through our lives. Active praying can help to provide the solid spirituality that enables us to follow Christ’s agenda rather than one of our own, where we might slip back into seeking justification for some kind of Christian triumphalism and hatred.

Is this kind of spiritual armor heavy and creaky? No, what God provides us for the challenges we face, lifts us and empowers us as we seek to apply God’s healing initiative not only to our own lives but also to the world around us. Our hope is not in something physical that we place over our bodies. Rather our hope is in Someone who works within and through people of faith to bring about a change beyond what the soldiers of any empire ever could. Equipped from above, let’s be prepared to move toward the challenges that are before us, serving a Commander in Chief who has different goals and means than any other.

Sabine Baring-Gold, 1864, word copyrighted by J. Curwen and Sons.

Holy God, Home of all who seek you: may you find in our hearts paths to walk, guiding us to make it through dark valleys, leading us to pools of living water, calling our attention to the grace falling softly upon us.

Loving Lord, as we follow you to our Home, enable us to see that when we embrace the sick, we touch our own healing; when we share with the poor, we find ourselves enriched; when we give of our time and energy, we are not left drained, but fulfilled. Work within and through us for your purposes.

Spirit of Strength, Bearer of our prayers, in an Ashley Madison world, show us the way toward faithfulness and commitment. In a bombastic world, show us your peace. Grant us the wisdom that leads to your true abundance and the longing to be with you always.

God in Community, God of community, hear us as we pray together, as Jesus has taught us, saying,

Early morning rains created pools filled with the sweet waters of life on that day of wonder and goodness we call creation, God of our joy. You shaped a garden where we might always find you, you offered hope to all who trusted you. But we found your words too hard, and the promises of sin too easy, your road to peace was too long,

and death's path was so short.

Through the ambassadors of your word you spoke, that we might know your name and return to your heart. But we were offended by their speech, and went our own way. So, you sent Jesus to us, to lead us back to you.

Holy are you, God of steadfast love, and blessed is Jesus, who has made you known. Trusting your heart, he poured out his love for us in every miracle, in every conversation.

Trusting your words, he told us of lost children welcomed with open arms, of outsiders who live out your grace.

Trusting you, Keeper of the covenant, he would not live in the tents of evil, but lived in your hope and peace.

Trusting your grace, he journeyed to the cross to defeat the power of death, to be raised to new life, to clear the way for your blessings for your beloved children.

How lovely is your Table of grace, God of mercy, the simple gifts of the bread and cup

transformed by your love, your Spirit of joy and hope filling your people who come to your feast. The bread of heaven feeds us with life, so we might go from person to person, bringing relief where there is pain, bringing hope where there is despair. The cup of grace is filled

with deep pools of your hope, so we might go to all the places of worry, anger, and discord, to share your peace for all people.

And when that day with you which will never end finally begins, when we are gathered with our sisters and brothers from every time and place, we will sing for joy to you, God of us all. Alleluia. Amen.