

**“Putting On the Armor of God”  
Ephesians 6:10-20**

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*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 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. 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. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 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. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 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.*

*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, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.*

Sometimes, context is everything.

I think I’ve shared this with a few of you—maybe in a Bible study or in a Sunday school class. In Texas, it’s illegal to carry a pair of wire cutters in your glove box. Did you know that? Should you drive into the state of Texas, you may want to just check your glove box, just to make sure you haven’t left a pair of wire cutters sitting there. It’s illegal according to Texas law. Of course, that law has been on the books in Texas for quite a while now. It dates back to a time when cattle thieves rode around with wire cutters in their glove boxes, ready to cut through a barbed wire fence and steal some longhorns.

Sometimes context is everything.

I can remember a creative writing teacher in college saying something to this effect. For a story, he said, context *is* everything as every story must be put into context. Context, he argued, is something like the whole truth, and the story you tell is simply a part of that truth.

That’s a good thought to keep in mind as we delve into the context of our passage from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians this morning. You see, I catch myself thinking from time to time that if Jesus were here again, he’d just straighten us all out. Conflict, war, poverty, health care debates... If Jesus put in another three years here on earth—teaching, healing, maybe writing a blog and hosting a cable TV talk show, just *think* how we could get things back on track!

Maybe. But the truth is that it didn’t take very long for things to fall apart after Jesus came the first time. Just thirty-some-odd years after the crucifixion, Jerusalem was at war. It started in the North, in Galilee, as local Zealots became fed up with the Roman authorities. What began as a few skirmishes brought the entire region into war.

The Roman Empire responded swiftly and one by one, villages and cities fell. The leaders of the rebellion fell back to Jerusalem to make a stand. But the power of the Roman army left them in ruins, and to drive the point home, the Romans destroyed the Temple there in Jerusalem.

This war, like all wars, brought everybody in. It's known today as the First Jewish-Roman War, and we can imagine that there was no family in that land that didn't have a son or a dad or a nephew or an uncle who took up a sword to join the cause. There has even been speculation that one of the Jesus' disciples, Simon the Zealot, was involved in the fighting. Certainly the conflict brought in members of the early Christian community, as most of them, like Jesus, were Jewish.

But Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." And Jesus said, "Bless those who persecute you." And Jesus said, "Love your enemies. Pray for them."

But how quickly things fall apart. And by the time Paul is writing his letter to the Ephesians, his context is one of violence and chaos. In the years following the Jewish-Roman War, both Jews and Christians faced increasing levels of persecution from Rome. Paul himself was sitting in a prison cell when he wrote his letter and Christians in general had to be careful. They hid their Scriptures in their homes. They met in secret, often at night. Jesus was not the last person to hang from a cross, and images of crucifixions continued to haunt the early Church.

Fear shaped their context—fear that they would be discovered, fear that their loved ones could be arrested, fear that their homes could be destroyed.

Context is everything when Paul writes: Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God. Stand firm. And then Paul describes just what the "whole armor of God" looks like:

It is the breastplate of righteousness.

The belt of truth.

Shoes that will make you ready to proclaim the gospel.

The shield of faith.

The helmet of salvation.

The sword of the Spirit.

Do you know what Paul is doing here? A breastplate, belt, shoes, a shield, a helmet, and a sword—the makings of your average Roman soldier. Only Paul says that the armor of God is unlike any weapon or shield we can imagine. The strength of God's power is never man-made, but God-given: righteousness, truth, gospel, faith, salvation, Spirit.

In context, Paul's message to the Ephesians is a message of peace. Even when persecutions come, even when you are utterly afraid, and even when you are tempted to fight, your strength is in God, not your shield or your sword.

So what do we do with this message today? Sometimes context is everything and our context is certainly different than that of Paul and the early Church. Just look at us, sitting here in this lovely place! We're not huddled in someone's upper room after dark, reading the Bible by

candlelight for fear that we might be discovered. How might we take the spirit of Paul's letter to the Ephesians and apply it today?

You may remember this incident in rural Pennsylvania a couple years ago, when a gunman took a one-room Amish school house hostage and eventually killed five of the students before ending his own life. It was awful, of course. And for a time, television crews invaded that small community and the country watched transfixed, as these Amish families dealt with the tragedy.

First, some elders visited Marie Roberts, the wife of the murderer, to offer forgiveness. Then, the families of the slain girls invited the widow to their own children's funerals. Next, they requested that all relief monies intended for Amish families be shared with Roberts and her children. And, finally, in an astonishing act of reconciliation, more than 30 members of the Amish community attended the funeral of the killer.

Christian writer Diana Butler Bass observed these acts of forgiveness and reconciliation along with the rest of us at the time, and she wrote a piece entitled, "What if the Amish were in Charge of the War on Terror?"

Her words shocked and offended some—they may shock and offend you this morning. I must confess uneasiness as I read them myself. And yet, as I've reflected on our passage this morning and on Jesus' teachings about peace, forgiveness, and loving our enemies, I am moved to share them.

Diana Butler Bass writes:

"What if the Amish were in charge of the war on terror? What if, on the evening of Sept. 12, 2001, we had gone to Osama bin Laden's house (metaphorically, of course, since we didn't know where he lived!) and offered him forgiveness? What if we had invited the families of the hijackers to the funerals of the victims of 9/11? What if a portion of The September 11th Fund had been dedicated to relieving poverty in a Muslim country? What if we dignified the burial of their dead by our respectful grief? What if, instead of seeking vengeance, we had stood together in human pain, looking honestly at the shared sin and sadness we suffered? What if we had tried to make peace?"

"We're too late for an Amish response to 9/11," she writes, "but maybe we should ask them to take over the Department of Homeland Security. After all, actively practicing forgiveness and making peace are the only real alternatives to perpetual fear and a multi-generational global religious war."

And then she concludes, "I can't imagine any other path to true security. And nobody else can figure out what to do to end this insane war. Why not try the Christian practice of forgiveness? If it worked in Lancaster, [Pennsylvania], maybe it will work in Baghdad, too."

Sometimes context is everything. In one context, the Amish put on the whole armor of God. And in our context, with sons and daughters continuing to serve our nation bravely, with lives on the line and our hopes and fears at hand, it's hard to imagine another course, perhaps. It's hard

to imagine what the whole armor of God might look like in the midst of our own fears and conditions. To tell you the truth, I personally struggle to imagine it all.

But my prayer is that God will equip us to be faithful in our context today, to daily strive to dress ourselves in the whole armor of God. Amen.