

Story and Meditation: What Is Our Armor?

August 22, 2021

1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11 22-30, 41-43

Ephesians 5:15-20

by Eric Anderson

The young honu felt pretty good about life. The water he swam in was warm and clear, there was plenty to eat on and about the reef, and there were plenty of other honu about. Sometimes he liked to swim and play. Sometimes he liked to listen to the honu kupuna tell stories. He loved the stories.

Sometimes the stories were about honu adventures, riding the wild swells of storms at sea. Sometimes the stories were about finding their way back to their hatching beach. Sometimes the stories were about tender moments when the sun's warmth felt like it was melting them into the sand as they dozed on the beach.

The honu kupuna also told cautionary stories, however. They warned against getting too close to hungry crabs and seals while they were still small and growing. They spoke of the dangers along the beach from shorebirds, especially in the first moments after hatching. They rumbled ominously about the danger that never quite faded away: the manō, the tiger shark, which when hungry would take on a full-size honu, shell and all, let alone a younger, smaller one.

The young honu was cautioned by the stories, but he'd grown enough that crabs and shorebirds no longer frightened him. He stayed away from the seals, who generally thought that he had too much shell on him to be good eating anyway. As for the sharks, well, he stayed close to other honu, assured that someone would spot a manō in time.

For any other potential danger, he had his shell, a strong shield against claw or tooth or beak. One or two shorebirds had tried a peck or two at it, and had flown away with an aching beak. What else was there to fear with a shell like his own?

So he was quite shocked when pain like fire lanced through one of his front flippers as he was browsing over the reef. He spat out the mouthful of algae and flailed around in surprise and shock. He quickly realized that something had sunk a mouthful of very sharp teeth into his flipper and was holding on fiercely – hungrily. He rocked back and forth in panic and in some despair, knowing that if the teeth held firmly he would not be able to return to the surface for air. He'd drown.

The struggle didn't last long, though it seemed like forever to the honu. The teeth lost their grip as the honu's flailing bumped the mouth into the sharp coral. With powerful strokes he shot to

the surface, and he kept going until he was well away from that spot on the reef. Looking about, he spotted two of the honu kupuna and swam to join them.

They were sympathetic to his sore flipper, but after looking it over carefully assured him that he'd be fine. "But what was it?" he asked. "I didn't get a good look at it, but it doesn't sound like anything I've heard about before."

The honu elders exchanged a look, and then one of them said, "When the teeth in your fin are as sharp as a pin, that's a moray."

The other chimed in, "When the gap in the reef is a mouthful of teeth, that's a moray."

The first added, "When the foe down below doesn't want to let go, that's a moray."

They concluded together with, "To escape to the air from a moray eel's lair, that's a good day."

The young honu said, "I thought my shell would protect me from anything. Well. Except manō."

The kupuna nodded, but one said, "No armor protects anyone from everything. It does its best, but caution helps it work better."

The other said, "And now you know one more place to be cautious."

I offer this story with apologies to Harry Warren and Jack Brooks, who wrote "That's Amore."

Ephesians 6 lays out, or rather advises donning, typical first century armor for a soldier. There's a belt, which isn't to hold up the trousers, or more accurately the tunic, but to carry pouches and things on. There's a breastplate, which probably wasn't a solid piece of metal for most Roman soldiers but consisted of bands of metal across the front and across the back, fastened with leather. There are shoes, most likely heavier and better built than everyday shoes, to carry the marching troops along the roads. There is a shield, and a helmet, and a sword – the sword, of course, would usually be carried in a scabbard on the belt, not in the hand.

Maren Tirabassi went a different and poetic direction at giftsinopenhands.wordpress.com. She writes, in part:

Therefore put on the sunscreen of God,
for there is no armor, money, last minute plan,
to assure wealthy nations
they will withstand the evil of global warming,
but do everything to ease the burning,
for you have skin in the game
and they are called – children.

Fasten the belt of vaccination
around the world,
and wear the mask of compassion
wherever you go ...
did I already mention children?

I have slightly different armor in mind. Contemporary armor that is meaningful for me might be an N95 mask, perhaps with a full-on biohazard suit complete with personal respirator. I'll trade the hobnailed boots of Rome for fabric shoe coverings that have been treated with anti-microbial agents. Instead of a sword, give me a portable container of hand sanitizer. Oh, and make sure my shield covers my face.

My whole Personal Protective Equipment of God, however, is a metaphor, even if there are days when I'd much rather it were my reality. So too was the Whole Armor of God described here in Ephesians. There's no physical belt, no helmet to wear or shield to hold. As Brian Peterson writes at Working Preacher, "It is paradoxically crucial that the armor described in our text includes whatever prepares one to proclaim the "gospel of peace" (verse 15). The imagery used here is armor for violent battle; however, the strength advocated is not the might of armies, but the world-reconciling power of God embodied in the cross of Christ."

Further, the purpose of this armor is not victory in a conquering invasion, it is preservation from outside attack. Richard Carlson writes at Working Preacher, "...the saints of God are on the defensive, not the offensive. This text is not an 'onward Christian soldiers' type of battle cry in which the church militant will usher in God's kingdom by attacking and rooting out all the forces which stand in opposition to God. Rather, the call is for the saints to stand firm and withstand the attacks of evil (stressed four times in verses 11-14)."

And that, in these days of pandemic, strikes a chord with me. I do not take the theological position that disasters are created by or organized by malicious forces in the world trying to bring suffering to humanity. By the way, I don't take the position that disasters are the work of God punishing humanity, either. Whether there is a conscious desire to inflict suffering, however, doesn't mean that suffering doesn't happen. Whether this is a consciousness that intends to do evil doesn't mean that evil isn't happening.

We are afflicted by a lot of evils, some of them due to forces that have no directing will, some of them due to human error, carelessness, or ignorance, and some of them due to human malice and direction.

So what is our armor in these days?

The virtues listed here remain essential components in the protection of the Christian spirit from the things in the world that might harm the soul. When we are beset with lies, misinformation, and mistakes, then a firm commitment to truth will be a superb defense. Truth remains that belt upon which all else suspends. Falsehood, despite its claims, crumbles, and as

with the misinformation spread about COVID-19 vaccines' safety and effectiveness, can be clearly revealed for what it is. Even as new infections climb and hospital beds fill, those in the hospital beds are nearly all those who have *not* received the vaccine.

Righteousness doesn't sound like it should be much protection from a pandemic, but a central attribute of Biblical righteousness is concern for the neighbor. Every physical mask I see on a human face is a declaration that that person intends to do right by their neighbor. Every arm which is sore from a vaccine injection is a declaration that that person intends to protect their neighbor from a dangerous illness.

Those shoes, carrying us to proclaim the gospel of peace – wait, it's the gospel of peace, not war. It's the good news of grace, not of harm. It's the journey to bring healing, not suffering. Wars, I'll remind you, are breeding grounds for transmissible disease. It's in peace that we will be able to stand and endure.

We rely upon faith and salvation to support us as we bear witness to the activity of the Holy Spirit. Though Ephesians calls the word of God a sword, the Holy Spirit is not a weapon, not a tool that human beings control. The Holy Spirit moves as it will. We do not wield the Spirit – the Spirit employs us in its work of salvation, and we look on in awe.

Something else to note from this passage. Christians do not stand alone. They stand together. Susan Henrich writes at Working Preacher, "The words calling upon believers to stand fast are plural. One believer alone does not have to be a kind of Don Quixote for God in the midst of a godless world, tilting at windmills and not taken seriously. This passage calls for considered, corporate resistance to evil when and wherever it is embodied in the structures of the world one lives in, through the power of God."

Whether it's the sunscreen or the breastplate or the N95 or the antimicrobial slipper, we stay strong through God's Spirit, through truth, through righteousness, through faith, through peace, through God's salvation. And we do this together.

Amen.