

Strange Armor

In the immediate wake of Woodstock, as the war in Vietnam raged on,
and John McCain lay wounded as a Prisoner of War in Vietnam,

Graham Nash wrote a song called *Teach Your Children Well*.

You who are on the road, must have a code that you can live by;

And so become yourself , because the past is just a good-bye.

Teach your children well, their father's hell did slowly go by.

And feed them on your dreams, the one they picked, the one you'll know by.

Don't you ever ask them why, if they told you, you will cry,

so just look at them and sigh, and know they love you.

Nash said that he really didn't know why he wrote the song at the time,

but shortly after writing it, he visited an art gallery where he saw

two photographs that he felt embodied the meaning of his song:

One, (by Diane Arbus), a black and white photo of a skinny, little boy

standing in Central Park, innocently holding a toy grenade in his hand;

the other, (by Arnold Newman), a full-color portrait of sinister German industrialist

Alfried Krupp, nestled amidst the bombs of his Nazi ordnance factory,

allegedly made by slave-labor and used to killed thousands.

(Songfacts.com. "Teach Your Children". *Déjà vu*. Crosby Stills, Nash and Young)

The point being, what do we want to teach our children, the next generation,

about defending themselves against the host of evil around us?

Do we want them to take up arms against the rulers and authorities,

the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil

as previous generations perhaps have done;

doing unto others, as they, perhaps, have done unto us?

Or is there another way to shield our innocent ones as they walk this world?

When I was on sabbatical two years ago, as school was beginning to start,

worshiping with various congregations each Sunday morning

and observing how they expressed what lay closest to their hearts,

the prayer that I heard over and over fall from their lips was this:

protect our children, O Lord; please protect our children.

That was the most universal sigh that I heard.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "The test of the morality of a society,

is what it does for its children."

Child advocate Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund,

says that the United States is failing this "Bonhoeffer Test",

in permitting children to drop out of school, by allowing children

to be born and subsist in poverty, in denying adequate health insurance,

and by allowing them to be killed by guns, one, every three hours.

(Sullivan, Kathleen J. *Stanford News*. "Longtime Advocate for Children Urges Stanford Audience to Stand Up for Kids". December 2, 2011)

And might I add to her litany: by separating fragile immigrant children

from their parents at our borders;

by perpetuating a culture of secrecy that allows sexual abuse

within our religious institutions;

and by failing to address the sharp increase in the number of unintentional
injury deaths to our young adults since 2012 due to motor vehicle crashes,
drug poisonings, suicide and homicide.

(Lee, Lois and Mannix, Rebekah. JAMA. "Increasing Fatality Rates From Preventable Deaths in Teenagers and Young Adults". August 14, 2018)

We, indeed, are failing the "Bonhoeffer Test".

So how do we protect our children, and our neighbors' children,
when many socio-political forces seem so indifferent to causing them harm?

Writing to the church at Ephesus, Paul's language reflects
the socio-political situation of twenty centuries ago,
when the Roman Empire was dominating culture and church
by its military strength; right by military might.

Today's passage comes at the conclusion of a long section of ethical exhortations
addressed to the children of God in the church at Ephesus,
who are suffering at the hands of their Roman occupiers.

It begins with the general statement: "Finally, be strong in the Lord,
and in the strength *of the Lord's mighty power.*" (v. 10)

In other words, the strength to resist the forces of harmful indifference
lie not in equipping a little boy with a hand-grenade, or a hand-gun,
or a semi, nor in authorizing an industrialist
to produce ordnance of mass destruction.

Rather, believers' strength will and must come from the Lord, alone,
and from the mighty power of the Lord within and among us.

And then Paul uses military imagery,

which would have been familiar to his first century readers,

to describe *the arsenal of inner resources* available to the faithful

for resistance of the world's evil schemes.

"Put on the whole armor of God," Paul says, to stand protected

from those who oppose God's ways.

This whole armor of God, *this strange armor*, is not visible to the naked eyes

of the bullies and harassers, discriminators, oppressors and suppressors

who should threaten to undo our most vulnerable ones.

This strange armor does not impart passive resistance,

although the sword of the Spirit/word is clearly the only offensive

weapon in the lot,

but rather suggests preparation and readiness to take a stand, to stand,

to stand firm, and to keep standing, four times Paul uses that verb,

in the face of all that desires to inflict harm

by means of fear, hatred, misogyny, xenophobia, injustice,

falsehood, racism, bigotry, apathy, etc.

This strange armor will serve as under-armor, to use a contemporary term:

an internal mighty fortress of support, courage, boldness

and underpinning, which will prepare believers to meet the

powers and principalities head on, standing firm in the Lord Almighty,

to whom belongs the battle, and not to us.

It is *strange armor*, indeed, for it is nothing like the child-sized full-body armor,

which a 14-year-old Joan of Arc wore as she lead the French forces

to claim victory at the Battle of Orleans in 1429;
nor is it like the magical invisibility cloak which Dumbledore received from Harry Potter's
father before his death, and gives to Harry as a gift when he enrolls
at Hogwarts, advising him to "use it well";
nor is it like those bullet-resistant Kevlar backpacks, which you can purchase for
for your children for about \$250.

This *strange armor* is like the armor which the vulnerable child-who-would-
be king, David, wore to battle the great and intimidating giant, Goliath.

It is the *strange armor* which defends BEST the least of these,
the least powerful ones, the most vulnerable ones, the most defenseless ones,
the ones who are gentle beings in a not-so-gentle world.

Where might I get this *strange armor*, you may ask?

Interesting question! If you Google "whole armor of God",
of course you find medieval suits of iron and mail
straight out of the novel, *Ivanhoe*;
you find a Whole Armor of God t-shirt on Amazon.com for \$19.99;
you find Armor of God, AOG, active clothing company out of Houston,
which sells sportswear with Christian themes imprinted on the front
that shares the Gospel even as it encourages
people toward an active and healthy lifestyle;
and surprisingly you will find a bevy of body art, tattoos, featuring
religious sleeves of gladiators, avenging angels, and stairways to heaven.

But these are all external forms of spiritual defense, which is not what Paul

has in mind as he girds up his fair and tender people for the baptismal battle
of their lifetimes in renouncing evil, as they have vowed;
as we have vowed in the waters of our baptism.

So, where might I get this *strange armor*?

Some may have an image, an icon, or an amulet,

which serves as a source of inner spiritual strength, allowing them to withstand
the flaming arrows of the evil one.

I remember hearing a fellow student preach during our daily 10:00 Chapel Service,
when we were students at Columbia Theological Seminary.

This particular friend happened to be one of a hand full of openly-gay seminarians
on campus at that time.

And he was enduring a particularly painful and open battle with HIV-AIDS

that allowed him to attend class when his health was optimal,

but forced him to drop out occasionally when his disease manifested
as pneumocystis pneumonia.

In a sermon he shared with our little seminary congregation, he detailed

what he saw when he gazed at the beautiful abstract pattern

of the stained glass windows flanking the pulpit where he stood.

“It may not look like anything to you,” he said, “but to me that’s a green stiletto:

the footwear of shalom that keeps my faith strong and makes me laugh

when the host of evil gangs up on me and I get discouraged.”

Ironically, that abstract image, which he saw as a green stiletto,

was the strange armor which gave him the strength and the courage

to fight the good fight, to persevere and finish seminary,
responding to God's calling upon his life, against all odds;
against all dangers, toils and snares.

So I want to suggest a similar source of inner strength, which also is available
to each of us in worship, if we dare don it as our strange armor
or pack it in our quivers of defensive arsenal.

I want to suggest our hymns of faith as sources of inner fortitude that we can
belt out, when we feel the need to encircle ourselves in truth,
or tap our feet to, when we wish to run the good race as peacemakers,
or pray twice, as we sing our prayers in the Spirit on all occasions.

These hymns, like our sacraments, are the gifts of God for the people of God:
a way of reminding ourselves that the Kingdom of God is near,
as Jesus proclaims (Matthew 10:7); so near that
the Kingdom of God actually is within us, too, (Luke 17: 21)
to arm, protect, and shelter, from the inside, out,
even and especially the most vulnerable among us.

So here a few verses of well-known hymns that we might want to
memorize and keep in our non-kevlar backpacks in order to stand,
to take a stand, to stand firm, and to keep standing
in our faith in Jesus Christ, the conquering Son, when challenges loom large.

We will sing these together, and then you can add to them from your
top-forty favorites, and thus compile your own *strange armor*
of inner strength and resilience.

That belt of truth – how about vs. 1 of *Glory, Glory Hallelujah*

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
he is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
he has loosed the fateful lightening of his terrible swift sword;
God's truth is marching on.
Glory, glory hallelujah! Glory, glory hallelujah!
Glory, glory hallelujah! God's truth is marching on.*

That breastplate of righteousness and footwear of peace – how about v. 3 of

*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing
Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the sun of righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn king!"*

That shield of faith, how about vs 1 & 2 of *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past*

*Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home.

Beneath the shadow of thy throne thy saints have dwelt secure;
sufficient is thine arm alone, and our defense is sure.*

And lastly, that helmet of salvation and sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,

I want to suggest the classic hymn of Christus Victor,

A Mighty Fortress, vs. 1 & 4:

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.

Our helper he, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.

For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe.

His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate,

on earth is not his equal.

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them abideth.

The Spirit and the gifts are ours through him who with us sideth.

Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also.

The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still.

His kingdom is forever.

Let's teach our children well, friends. Let's teach them to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness

and love, as Paul also advocates in Colossians 3.

But let's teach them also to fill up and fortify their inner reserves with the truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, Spirit and prayer,

which Christ makes immediately available to all of the faithful.

As Americans, we just might be failing the Bonhoeffer Test, as Edelman suggests.

But as Christians, let's not also fail the Matthew 25 Test to protect and defend the vulnerable ones, the least of these, in the name of Jesus Christ.

For as Bonhoeffer also said in another beautiful hymn which he penned,
shortly before his death:

*By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered
and confidently waiting, come what may,
we know that God is with us night and morning,
and never fails to greet us each new day. Amen.*

(Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *By Gracious Powers*. Trans. Fred Pratt Green, 1972)