

Iron Man and the Full Armor of God
Ephesians 6:10-20
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Woodbury UMC
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I am a lifelong fan of comic strips and comic books of all kinds. The first thing I put on the wall of the church office was a signed issue of Black Panther. I really love the art form – comics and jazz are the two great art forms that come from American culture. When you combine words and visuals, you can do pretty much anything.

The full armor of God. How could I read this and NOT think of Iron Man? (How many here have seen any of the Iron Man movies, or any of the Avengers movies?)

Iron Man was created in the 1960s, and his origin story in the comic books was tied to Viet Nam. In 2008, Iron Man made his first appearance in a Marvel big screen film, and here his origin is tied to Afghanistan.

Before we have Iron Man, we have Tony Stark. He is a war profiteer, a billionaire and genius inventor who makes advanced weapons and his company sells them around the world. He loves a good party, leads a life of debauchery, and doesn't have a care in the world. After being caught in a terrorist ambush, he is recognized. His captors delay their plan to execute him long enough to persuade him to build special weapons to give a lethal advantage over their enemies. What's more, he is seriously injured, which shrapnel blasted into his chest that would soon move to his heart and kill him.

Tony realizes they have no intention of ever releasing him, but he agrees to their plan, and with the materials the terrorists provide, he is able to build a flying suit of armor, with crude but effective weaponry that is enough to escape his captors. What's more, the whole thing is powered by a reactor that rests just over his heart, generating a field to hold the

shrapnel so that it does not reach his heart. **The suit of armor is literally the only thing keeping him alive.** Not only has he invented this battle armor, but in the process, he has reinvented himself as Iron Man. It makes for a great story for many reasons – action, humor, and a really unusual character arc that avoids some of the oversimplification that is stereotypically associated with comic books.

One of the most relevant bits for us gathered in worship today is the fact that Tony's life is ruled by self-centered-ness. His father started the company, creating munitions during WW2, and Tony took that ball and ran with it, focusing entirely on weapons and war profiteering, which is just as profitable in his fictional world as it is in our own world. There is a pivotal moment in the film where Tony is in a dangerous, desperate situation, and when he sees stockpiles of weaponry? **They all have his name on them.** He is just starting to realize how much blood is on his hands, and he wasn't able to see it until it unexpectedly becomes very personal.

This has been Tony's pattern for his entire life, and it will take years for him to even begin to make amends. That is another thing I like about this character arc. At the beginning of the film, Tony is a morally dubious, self-centered, egotistical braggart. By the time we get to the end of the film, after a nearly two hour tale of redemption and learning to see the world differently, promising to do a better job? After all of that, we are left with a Tony who is still a morally dubious, self-centered, egotistical braggart – and who is now a powerful super hero as well. He becomes a changed person, but living into that change takes a very, very long time.

Has anyone ever told you that being a Christian can change your life? I believe that. Has anyone ever told you that all you need to do is give all your troubles to Jesus and after that it's a worry free existence? As a Christian, your troubles are over? If so, make sure they didn't get your wallet while you were distracted, because that isn't even close to how it

works. Being a Christian will change your life if you let it, but it can take a LONG time for that to play out, and you have NO reason to expect that things will be worry free. In Christ, you are a new being and a citizen of the kingdom of God in heaven – but in our world, it may take people a while to respond to that.

Tony has a moment of clarity when he decides that his entire company will no longer make weapons of any kind, and instead will focus on technologies that better the world. For the rest of the movie — in fact for the rest of his live, people from his previous life fight back, bitterly and painfully.

Change is difficult. If you have ever recognized sinful behavior or habits in yourself, and decided that you want to repent? Don't be surprised if those habits refuse to go without a fight, or that the people you enjoyed doing them with are resistant to the new you. The third Iron Man film starts many years in the past, showing Tony being needlessly cruel to a man – and that man comes back years later, bent on Tony's destruction, not caring that Tony has changed. Tony hurt him, and now it's time to pay him back for that old insult. There have been several movies prominently featuring Iron Man over the past decade, and a major running theme is trying to make amends for past harmful deeds.

That's another thing. Over the course of those years and those films, Tony upgrades the armor, again and again. If you saw Avengers Infinity War or Avengers Endgame a few years back, Iron Man was more impressive and far more capable than what we first saw on screen over a dozen years ago. He never rests on past accomplishment, always striving for those minute upgrades that make the difference. With God's help, we need to be doing the same. That Armor of God changes as we change, is upgraded through our efforts in conjunction with God's grace. We are challenged to take up the shield of faith. What's the state of YOUR faith? Mine isn't the same as it was ten years ago, and I consider that a gift of God that helps me every day.

We are told to take up the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. If you study scripture, if you pray, if you come together in worship? Each of these things will strengthen your spirit. If you make them all regular parts of your spiritual life? You might be amazed at the ways it can transform your life. Remember that reactor in Tony's chest, that is the source of the armor's power and is the part keeping him from certain death? It not only gives him life, but also powers his suit. Our power comes from the Holy Spirit, without which we too are in mortal danger, and the whole armor doesn't work, doesn't particularly make sense without it. Without the Holy Spirit, we can neither have life nor can we have power in our armor.

The armor is the only thing keeping Tony from dying — It may be possible that for some of us, the full armor of God is the only thing keeping us going as well. We have a lot of images for God, some more helpful than others, and it is an interesting one to imagine being fully covered in Gods armor, protecting you from the harms of the world. In one film, Tony is frustrated by the constant threats, and says sometimes he just wishes he could put a suit of armor around the whole world. If you've ever worried about a loved one—if you are a parent, watching you children go out into the world on their own—it is a powerful and yet relatable image.

Anyway, back to the reactor. He keeps upgrading that, too. There is a funny, gross scene in one film where he gets help from his partner and girlfriend to swap out the old reactor for a better one, so she has to reach into a hole in his chest, pull out the old one, then quickly attach the new one. I had to laugh when it hit me: Tony literally has a change of heart. Not only that, but his first change of heart isn't enough. I mean, it is enough for the time being, but sooner or later he needs another one.

Sound familiar? There was a point long ago where I decided I wanted to give my heart to Jesus. I believe something happened that day, but I also believe that Jesus loves us too

much to leave us where we are without helping us out. We continue to grow, and Jesus is there. We continue to have challenges, and Jesus is there for that, too. Salvation is not a one shot deal. It is something you live into, day after day after day. After several films, Tony was able to get to a point where the shrapnel threatening to kill him is finally handled once and for all. I don't think I'll ever reach a point where I am fully perfected in this life time, but I am ok with that, because I know who I belong to, and we keep working on it.

What else? When I was studying about this passage, I was surprised to learn that this is not the only place in scripture where we are told of an Armor of God. The prophet Isaiah 59:15-17 says:

The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.

That is an interesting difference. The prophet notes that God's own self is putting on the armor of righteousness, and a helmet of salvation. He is displeased at the lack of justice he sees, and so thinks FINE—I will handle this myself. This makes abundantly clear where this Armor of God originates: it is literally God's armor, on loan to us. Talk about stewardship! God has given us all of creation for a time, and it is our duty to be good stewards while it is in our possession. I'm thinking it is the same thing with the armor of God. Salvation, righteousness, wrapped in zeal – these are the work of God, and probably a model we would do well to follow, and to take seriously.

There is another item described here: the garments of vengeance. We don't see that in the New Testament. There are a few places in both the Old and New Testaments where God says Vengeance is Mine—it comes up more than once. I guess when God passes us the

armor, God decided that that one part was not meant for us. Iron Man is a superhero, but Tony Stark is very human. He does lots of good, saves lots of people, but in one film in particular, we see Tony using his abilities for vengeance. Spoiler alert: it doesn't turn out well.

By the way, in contrast to garments of vengeance, I posted online that I was writing this sermon, and an old friend noted that when telling her children about the full armor of God, her son told her that she had forgotten something very important: the pants of forgiveness. Swapping out the garments of vengeance for the pants of forgiveness sounds like very good advice to me. I bet there are a lot of us who could use pants of forgiveness.

There is one final thing I want to point out. When you think of armor, you think of defense. Armor doesn't attack -- it defends. Iron Man's armor is tricked out with some pretty cool weapons. However, in our godly armor, there is only one aggressive weapon, and that is the sword of the spirit, the word of God. We talked about that before, and how studying scripture can be transformative. If we take this another step, you realize that this weapon is not even in our control. If it is really a Sword of the Spirit, then the spirit of God is in charge, not us. There are plenty of times we think we are in charge, but it is God who orders our steps, whether we realize it or not. Therefore, it is not we who use it as a weapon, but the Spirit of the Lord, in us, that determines how it is used.

I could go on but let me just say one more thing about this. If you ever find yourself using Scripture to harm someone, you are the one in the wrong.

I am pretty sure Jesus came that we may have life abundantly. I have seen far too many people who use scripture to inflict pain on other people, and far too many people who have been hurt by very vocal bad theology that seems disconnected from the God that truth is sourced in. I'm not buying it. When messages intended as truth lead away from love, they are not a Christian message. We would do well to heed the Holy Spirit, and pray that it enables us to use the word of God wisely.

And that is my prayer for every one of you here today. The armor of God looks good on you. May it keep you safe, may it make you bold, and may it remind you that you are God's own beloved, ever worthy of the pants of forgiveness.

Amen.