

There Was No One (Ephesians 6:10-20)

I remember when my mom called me and told me that if I wanted to see my grandfather, I'd better hop on a plane and get myself to Harlingen, Texas; it wasn't going to be long.

She called about 8:00 on a Sunday morning in December, 2003. Under ordinary circumstances, I would call someone in leadership and tell them that I needed to hop on a plane, and could they help me find someone to fill in on short notice. But the problem was, I was having a very bad time at the church just then. There was some speculation about how long I'd last as things were deteriorating.

So, when my mom called, I said, "I've got to go to preach this morning. I'll get on a flight as soon as I can after church."

She said, "Can't you come now?"

And I said, guilt establishing a beachhead in my heart, "I really can't. It's too close to service and I can't afford the kind of blowback I know will be coming my way if I don't show up."

In tears, she said, "But it's your grandpa. Why would they get mad at you for wanting to see him before he dies?"

I didn't have a good answer for her. I didn't want to tell her that even with one of the most important people in my life dying, I wasn't sure my job would still be there when I got back.

So, I went to church, stumbled through the service, and then took off to the airport to hop on a flight to say goodbye to my grandfather. He had colon cancer. And even though he was a tough guy, a World War II marine, he was suffering terribly. The whole way to Harlingen, I was stressed about my grandfather, about my job, about how I was going to make it through.

After we landed, I was walking through the concourse and I saw my mom and my uncle Juan walking toward me. I could see my mom was crying, which didn't surprise me under the circumstances. But when she reached me, she said, "Your grandpa died about an hour ago. He went peacefully, thank the good Lord."

Somebody I desperately wanted to see, but I still found a way to let my own stuff get in the way of me being there for my family when it mattered most. If I could go back and do it all over again, I would have just called somebody and told them I couldn't be there for church that morning and let the chips fall where they may. I didn't show up for my grandpa, for my grandma, for my mom, for my uncle Juan—some of the most important people in my life—when they needed me most. Think about how easy it is, then, to fail to show up for people **nobody** much cares about—even for people who love Jesus.

But that's not a new thing, is it?

Those who call themselves by God's name have too often failed to show up for the people everyone else feels comfortable leaving behind. And it's not just the travails of the LGBTQ community, the oppression of our Black and Brown siblings, our immigrant neighbors, the elderly warehoused in institutions, the countless kids who will be needlessly exposed to Covid. Those who call themselves children of God have often stayed deafeningly silent in the face of the suffering, oppression, and neglect of our neighbors whom God also calls children.

During the seventy-five-plus year abomination of lynching in this country, Black people looked around for support from White Christians only to find that there was no one.

Late nineteenth/early twentieth-century African American anti-lynching activist, Ida B. Wells, outraged by white evangelist Dwight Moody's crusades in the South said, "Our American Christians are too busy saving the souls of white Christians from

burning in hellfire to save the lives of black ones from present burning in fires kindled by white Christians.” (James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 132)

As theologian James Cone observed, “For Ida B. Wells, Christian identity had to be validated by opposing mob violence against a powerless people, and no amount of theological sophistry could convince her otherwise.” (Ibid.)

According to Ida B. Wells, we’ve failed that test time and again.

But you don’t even have to go back that far. There are close to 500 children who’ve been ripped from the arms of their parents who are still separated from them. Those parents and children waited for what must have—I’m sure—felt like eternity for someone to acknowledge that they’re children of God, someone who would be willing to say “no” to the powers and principalities. Too often they’ve looked around, and there’s been no one.

This is the same charge laid at the feet of the children of Israel as they languished in exile in Babylon all the way back in the sixth century BCE. Isaiah writes in chapter 59:

Good judgment is turned back, and justice stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled. The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. God saw that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene (Is. 59:14–16a).

The children of Israel have committed grave sins by the powerful against the weak. Isaiah says:

Your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue mutters wickedness. No one brings suit justly, no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies,

conceiving mischief and begetting iniquity ... The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace. Therefore good judgment is far from us, and justice does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom (59:2–4, 8–9).

Not an especially pleasant picture, is it? God has given responsibility to the powerful to protect the weak, and they've not only **not** protected the weak—they've preyed on them, their hands dipped to the elbows in the blood of the innocent.

God is disgusted. Isaiah tells us that "the LORD saw it, and it displeased God that there was no justice. God saw that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene."

So what does God do?

God takes matters into God's own hands.

Because there is no justice, because the people have remained silent in the face of injustice, Isaiah says that God "put on *tzedek*—justice—like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on God's head; God put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped Godself in fury as a mantle" (59:17).

There is no justice to be found among the leaders of the people, and so God stands alone. There was no one.

This far in you may be asking yourself, "I thought this was a sermon on Ephesians. Why are we spending so much time on Isaiah?"

See, that's what I love about y'all—you're always one step ahead of me.

This passage from the letter to the saints in Ephesus is a famous one. Growing up, I must have heard dozens of sermons on this passage. Put on the whole armor of God.

Why was I encouraged to clad myself in the protective covering of the celestial carapace?

To guard against the evil one, of course. "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."

It's about spiritual warfare, man. I remember when I was young reading a "Christian" novel (generally speaking, an unfortunate literary genre), entitled *This Present Darkness*, which was about a literal war between heaven and the spiritual forces of evil. The protagonist was able to overcome the deadly powers of Satan and his liberal humanist minions by praying, calling on angels to keep

people safe from falling into sin ... not **all** sin, of course, but—you know—individual sin—stuff like lust, swearing, drinking, adultery, backsliding, apostasy ... that kind of sin.

So, I was taught that putting on the whole armor of God had to do with protecting my individual soul against the “flaming arrows of the evil one.” Belt of truth, shield of faith, sword of the spirit ... that kind of stuff. It was all about keeping **me** safe from the temptations of the devil.

And this passage from Ephesians, all these cool spiritual warfare gadgets—sort of like my own personal ecclesiastical Bat Cave, so I could fight the forces of evil and prevail. It was a kind of Marvel/DC Comics vision of spirituality, in which **I** was the hero.

The problem with that interpretation of this passage is that it fails to take something very important into account: The translators of the New Revised Standard Version didn’t do us any favors. The passage is explicitly addressed to *adelphoi*, which was the term of

address we used to use in the conservative churches of my childhood: Brethren. So, the beginning of the passage should read, updated for inclusion: "Finally, my siblings, be strong in the Lord ... "

Furthermore, the verbs are almost entirely second person plural, meaning the passage should sound like it was written in the American South: "Y'all, put on the whole armor of God, so that y'all may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil ... "

In other words, this is a passage that is addressed to the community, not to Christian Caped Crusaders. The armor is to be taken up and worn by the **entire** community.

Now, you might be tempted at this point to say, "Ok, fine. So, it's not about how I can become a holy crime fighter, a beatified Bat Man. But what was all that stuff about Isaiah?"

Y'all won't let me get away with anything. So, here's the thing:
The reason I bring up Isaiah's vision of an outraged God pursuing justice alone because there was no one else to do it is because that's the passage the author of Ephesians is thinking about too.

For the sake of discussion, let's say the author is Paul. Paul uses the same exact imagery used by Isaiah: The breastplate of justice and the helmet of salvation. So, if Paul's channeling Isaiah here, let's remind ourselves what the breastplate of justice and the helmet of salvation refer to.

In Isaiah, God dons the armor in order to set things right, because the people God left in charge had failed to pursue justice. In the midst of tyranny and oppression, God looked around, and there was no one. And so God puts on the holy armor all by Godself. Having God put on the armor alone is the grave error Paul's looking to remedy in this passage from Ephesians.

In other words, there was a time when God alone was seeking justice for the weak and the powerless. Paul says that the community of the faithful, because of the example of Jesus, needs to take its place alongside God, to put on the same armor God put on all those years before in Israel—not so that we can fight our individual demons, but so that justice will no longer stand at a distance and truth will no longer stumble in the public square.

Paul says that we're part of the divine Justice League—because justice is precisely what God desires, but what is too often nowhere to be found.

When Paul says that our struggle isn't against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places—he's not talking about some other worldly weirdness. The cosmic powers of this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places aren't some kind of super demon army,

some version of Indiana Jones and the Flaming Arrows of the Evil one.

And he's not talking about our personal demons for which we need a mystical Batmobile and sanctified kevlar. He's talking about the powers and principalities that institutionalize injustice and subjugation right here, right now.

The kind of powers and principalities that let LGBTQ people suffer alone with no one to speak their name, the kind of spiritual forces of evil that have systematically terrorized African Americans for four hundred years, the cosmic powers of this present darkness that lock immigrant children not in spiritual prisons tended by celestial guards, but in actual cages tended by agents of Caesar.

How do I know that?

Apart from the striking reference to God's donning of the same breastplate of justice and helmet of salvation in Isaiah 59, I know

that because those cosmic powers have imprisoned Paul. He reminds us in this passage that he's writing while in chains—not some kind of spiritual chains, not some kind of personal prison of his own sinfulness, but actual this-worldly-iron-Roman-military-issue chains.

In other words, Paul's immediate concerns are ... well, immediate. He's acutely aware of the spiritual battle of the powerful against the powerless, because the powerful have wrapped him in chains. He also knows that the community of the faithful in Ephesus to whom he's writing has little power of its own against a sometimes hostile Roman state.

But notwithstanding the community's marginalized status, Paul says they've been given the tools to resist the cosmic powers that imprison the vulnerable and set upon the voiceless, the spiritual forces of evil that establish unjust systems and prey upon the defenseless. Moreover, those who follow Jesus have not only been given the breastplate of justice and the helmet of salvation to

oppose injustice, they've been called to stand next to God in the battle for the dignity and protection of the vulnerable and of Ida B. Wells and of those children who are still separated from their parents—for all the children who've been abused by the clergy and those who can't find adequate healthcare or food or housing ... for all the people who feel powerless and forgotten.

When God looks at a world filled with unjust systems, when those who've been crushed under the boot of oppression behold the machinery of subjugation, they shouldn't see no one ... they should see us.

—Amen.