8/1-2/20 Anchor Up with Salvation Rev. Amy Haines

Acts 16:16-40 Armor Up Series

What’s your favorite hat? Is it one that looks good, one that is broken in, or one that protects you?

I have always admired Joy Mindling’s elaborate hat collection, as each week she would wear a different stylish hat to worship. My brother-in-law has a collection of baseball caps, many of which are NACSAR related. Some are new, and some are well worn. As my son Timothy finally got a new used bicycle this summer, I think the next purchase for him will need to be a new bike helmet.

I confess, I have never really been a hat wearer. I own only one baseball cap—a pink West Ohio cap that I brought home from Annual Conference several years ago. I’ve looked at those big straw hats, as I tend to burn easily, but have never liked the way those hats look on me. If I am ever in need of a hart hat, I will have to borrow one from someone else.

Hats and helmets are used for a variety of purposes. Some to look stylish. Some to keep the sun out of our eyes. Some to protect us.

Picture in your mind today the many hard hats and helmets that try to protect our heads—hard hats on construction sites, bike helmets when out on the road, sports helmets such as when batting in baseball, playing football or even rock climbing.

Today, we are invited to borrow a hard hat from God, so to speak, to armor up once more, as Paul reminds us in the letter to the church at Ephesus, this time putting on the helmet of salvation.

As the children have learned this past week through Vacation Bible School, as we have reflected on over the past five weeks, we are called to put on God’s armor, God’s ways, God’s characteristics as our own, to help us stand strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

Even here and now, we are called to

“Stand with the belt of truth around your waist,

justice as your breastplate,

and put shoes on your feet so that you are ready to spread the good news of peace.

Above all, carry the shield of faith so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one.

Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God’s word.”

 -Eph 6:14-17 CEB

The last piece of armor put on by Roman soldiers was a hot and heavy helmet. This helmet was large enough and strong enough to not only protect one’s head, but also one’s ears and eyes. As most head wounds were mortal wounds, a soldier strove to always keep his helmet on during battle.

When we put on the helmet of salvation, we are seeking to protect our heads, our minds, our knowledge of who we are and who God is. When we put on the helmet of salvation, we put on the assurance that we have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus, salvation that comes not through our good works, but as a gift from God. When we put on the helmet of salvation, we can let go of worry and doubt if we believe in Jesus as our Savior. When we open ourselves to God’s salvation, we are not only protected but transformed.

Today, in our story from the Book of Acts, we journey with Paul and Silas as the gospel continues to expand to the ends of the world. Today, we hear once again how many people from different walks of life are transformed by the saving grace of Jesus.

Paul, who once was Saul, is continuing to be transformed by the gift of salvation. He who once arrested others for uttering the name of Jesus was now willing to be arrested to proclaim the good news of Jesus. He who was blinded to the truth of Jesus has now found that truth to be eternal good news.

Paul and Silas were traveling together throughout the regions of Galatia and Phrygia when Paul had a vision to cross over to Macedonia. This would be the first time they traveled beyond modern day Turkey into what is now Greece. Yet at that time, all of the area was under the rule of the Roman Empire.

Paul and Silas traveled to the colony of Philippi, and there began to find God-fearing women who were praying along the river on the Sabbath. Lydia, a wealthy merchant, opened her heart to the good news of Jesus. As she was transformed by the gift of salvation, she invited the apostles to stay with her.

As Paul and Silas traveled each day to and from the riverbank to share the good news of Jesus,

a slave girl began to follow them and cry out,

“These people are servants of the Most High God!

They are proclaiming a way of salvation to you!” (v17 CEB)

Even though she was known as a truth teller, even though this slave girl made her owners a great deal of money by telling fortunes, she annoyed Paul by her constant words.

After several days of this, Paul was annoyed enough to turn around to her and say to the spirit inside her, “In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to leave her!” (V18 CEB)

In that moment the spirit obeyed. Her chains were gone.

Her owners, however, were none too happy about her healing. Their hope of making money off her fortune telling now gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them in front of the local magistrates, insisting that they were not only disturbing the city, but also as Jews advocating customs that were not lawful for Roman citizens to observe. There was no freedom of religion in that time and place, if the ways of religion went against the ways of the state or the wishes of the Emperor.

The crowd joined in the uproar against these two disciples of Jesus. The magistrate had them flogged and thrown in jail. Not only were they simply imprisoned; they were given the innermost cell and placed in chains.

This was not the first time disciples of Jesus ended up in chains behind bars. The early followers of Jesus were constantly getting thrown in jail for uprooting societal norms or doing something that went against the Empire, all because they were passionate to share the transforming love and grace of Jesus and placed their faith in Jesus ahead of allegiance to the emperor.

On this day in Philippi, Paul and Silas found themselves beaten and imprisoned. Jails then were nothing like our jails today. They were dank, dark, filthy, and often violent places. Yet did these disciples complain? No. Midnight arrived and found them praying and singing songs to God, with the other prisoners listening to them!

Their faith has encouraged others who have later found themselves in jail. In 1961, in a Jackson, Mississippi jail, young civil rights protestor James Bevel began to sing. The cells grew quiet, enthralled by his stunning voice. The white prison guard demanded quiet, but Bevel sang on, singing “The Lord is my Shepherd.” At first, the guard believed the song was coming from a smuggled radio. When he realized it was Bevel singing, he walked away, uncertain if he felt anger or faith.

--adapted from David Halberstam, In [*The Children*](https://www.amazon.com/Children-David-Halberstam/dp/0449004392),

told by James Howell 6-2-19 ministrymatters.com v16-34

Suddenly, while Paul and Silas continued to sing and pray, a mighty earthquake opened all the prison doors and loosened all the prisoners’ chains. This was not the first time an earthquake had rescued the followers of Jesus. Angels opened prison doors for the apostles in Acts 5, and Peter escaped the jail of Herod with the help of an angel in Acts 12. What was different this time, however, was no one left their prison cells.

The Roman jailer, awakened by the earthquake, assumed all of the prisoners had escaped.

Knowing he would be blamed for their escape, the jailer prepared to lay down his own life by the sword until Paul cried out, “Don’t harm yourself! We’re all here!” (v28 CEB)

The jailer was amazed. Why had none left? Why were they still there?

Why was Paul, a Jew from Jerusalem, concerned about his life, a Roman jailer in Philippi?

The jailer rushed in and fell down, trembling, in front of Paul and Silas. Leading them outside, he cried out in fear, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (v30 NRSV)

“They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your entire household.’ They spoke the Lord’s word to him and everyone else in his house.”  (v31-32 CEB)

Originally, the jailer may have simply been asking how to keep his life and get out of that mess.

Yet, the more he talked with Paul and Silas, the more the jailer began to understand the good news of Jesus, good news that led men beaten and bleeding and behind bars to pray and sing and rejoice even amid trying circumstances, good news that kept prisoners from escaping and valued his life.

The jailer was so moved that he took Paul and Silas to his own home. He washed their bloody wounds. He fed them. He listened to them. And he and his entire household were baptized that night, rejoicing in their newfound faith in God.

Remember, this is a Roman citizen. A jailer. A man who had never before paid attention to the God of the Jews. Now, he, too, has been transformed by the gift of salvation, believing in a God who loved him and a Savior who redeemed him.

Imagine the surprised local police the next day, when they were sent to release Paul and Silas in secret, yet Paul and Silas demanded a public apology. The magistrates, now fearful of a scene because they realized they were also Roman citizens, came to them, apologized, then begged them to leave their city.

Before leaving town, Paul and Silas once again went to Lydia’s home, in order to encourage their fellow believers, and possibly inviting them to now embrace the jailer and his family as fellow believers.

Once again, the church expanded person by person, house by house, across any and all divisions.

As Scripture reminds us time and again, the gift of salvation is not simply for those who have their lives all together. The gift of salvation is not only for those who have a strong faith background. And the gift of salvation is not merely a life insurance policy for eternity.

The gift of salvation is the gift of God’s love for each and every one of us, no matter how messy our lives are or have been. The gift of salvation is the promise of a relationship with Jesus whether or not we know the stories or songs of faith. The gift of salvation is God’s presence with us, transforming us for this life while promising us the gift of eternal life.

When we put our faith and trust in Jesus, we are then encouraged to put on all of God’s ways as our ways, in order to stand strong in the Lord and the strength of his power, not our own.

This may be the most important part of God’s armor, as God’s saving grace can then transform not only our thoughts, but also our actions; not only our beliefs, but also our convictions; not only our future, but also our present.

God’s saving grace is not something we can earn; it is only a gift that we can receive.

And as Paul and Silas told that Roman jailer, we are saved through our belief in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

In a few minutes we will share together the bread and cup of Holy Communion, a tangible reminder of the sacrificial and deep love of God for each and every one of us.

As John 3:17 reminds us,

“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,

but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (ESV)

Are you ready to put on the helmet of salvation this day, to give thanks that God loves you, Jesus forgives you, and the Holy Spirit yearns to lead you to live by God’s ways of truth and peace, justice and righteousness, faith and prayer?

Whether this is the first time you have considered the gift of salvation, or you are giving thanks today for a life grounded in the saving grace of God, I invite you to join me now in prayer, armoring up with the helmet of salvation.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, thank you for your love, your forgiveness, your transforming power, your strength. Forgive us when we try to save ourselves. Forgive us when we try to earn our salvation. Guide each and every one of us today to armor up with the gift of salvation.

For those who have journeyed long with Jesus, may they be renewed in faith this day.

For those who are tentatively stepping out in faith for the first time, may they know the peace of your presence.

May we all simply proclaim, Jesus, I believe in you. Fill my heart. Forgive my sins. Lead me into new relationships that honor you.

Surround us with your love and grace, your power and presence, this day and every day, as we go to live transformed by the gift of salvation.

Guide us, renew us, and empower us for the journey of faith, as followers of Jesus.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen.