

We all have some version of the classic anxiety nightmare once in a while, the one where you somehow arrive at a meeting unprepared, or even naked, and everyone is laughing at you. This is a nearly universal experience because the way we present ourselves is an extension of who we are, a projection of ourselves into the social world, and one we can control — one we are expected to control. And while I don't care what clothes you wear to church, just so long as you wear *something*, and I don't think God cares, either, the self you are constantly cultivating is of very great concern to God and to the other members of this community.

Of course, the recent surprise attack on Israel is a horrific reminder of the very real potential consequences of being unprepared. While perceptions are, by definition, an aspect of terrorism, the loss of life should always be kept at the center of the public understanding of such atrocities. We are so intent on looking away that we are prone to turning our attention to factionalism and speculation. But while there are legitimate grievances on both sides, terrorism and war crimes are never justified.

Jesus knew how easily people could be distracted from what's important, and how easily people can rationalize violence, so he tells us a parable that turns from a beautiful feast to a shocking tale of betrayal and violence and then into an anxiety nightmare. The story begins in a perfectly ordinary way, with a king inviting his inner circle to his son's wedding, the most lavish affair anyone in the kingdom could ever experience. They respond in a truly bizarre way, not only refusing to attend — not just disrespectful, but treasonous in itself — but also literally killing the messengers. Perhaps they didn't want to acknowledge the king's authority, but the reason for their refusal isn't the point of the story. There are at least three.

The first point is that the original guests are unworthy. They may occupy elite social status, they may be wealthy and privileged, but their behavior betrays them, shows them to be entitled, disrespectful, ungrateful; they repay the king's beneficence with treason. The king is not concerned with their wealth, their station and privileges; he is certainly not impressed, for he would be the who conferred them in the first place. In a monarchy, the nobility are notionally the king's stewards, not his rivals. And so this king puts down the rebellion with extreme prejudice.

The second point is that everybody, absolutely everybody, is welcomed in to the feast, from the top of society to the very bottom. The welcome is so indiscriminate that it includes "both good and bad." OK. Great, so we're all set. Sounds like a vision we can embrace and be totally comfortable with. Thank you Jesus, well done, you can stop right there; two points are quite enough.

The third point takes some drawing out because Jesus makes it in a way that is, on the face of it, baffling. The king, the generous, magnanimous king, suddenly picks on one guy just because he is dressed inappropriately. And this guy's day turns into a real nightmare. So here's the thing: the problem is not really with the guest's clothing. The king isn't impressed by the

trappings of wealth, after all. But the king is deeply concerned with the hearts, minds, and souls of all his people, high and lowly. The underdressed guest, even though he is an ordinary man, even though he does no violence to anyone, is displaying the same entitled, disrespectful, ungrateful inner self as the original guests. And the king, who cares very much about character and decisions, reacts with the same swift resolution.

I interpret the guests' clothes as symbolizing their true inner selves, the state of their hearts, minds, and spirits as they are in the present. The wedding garment that every guest but one is wearing symbolizes a faithful response to God's call to a holy life. Even the guests who have less than laudable histories arrive in garments of respect and deep gratitude for the invitation as well as the banquet itself. Even the poor guests can afford kindness, compassion, and humility. Fine linen may be hard to come by, but there is no limit to the number nor the quality of good deeds that we can weave into our own garments. And just as a fine wedding garment is out of place in the streets, the fields, the marketplace— so too does a Christian life set us apart from the life the world would have us lead.

It would be easy to make this story about the afterlife, heaven and hell, but it's really about the present. God is present in the world now. The time to prepare, to don our best garments, is now. Here at Advent, we do our best to offer a spiritual banquet to a hungry world, and as we do so, we fashion our garments. We offer spiritual nourishment with our worship services, bible study, Godly Play, Day School, and other ministries; and emotional nourishment of fellowship and hospitality to friends and visitors alike. And, I wish I had known that Bishop Lambert was going to speak so directly about stewardship and outreach last week, because Advent is already giving close to 10% of our income to Grace Mission and other outreach ministries, which give literal, physical nourishment to those who need it most. Perhaps we can get beyond that figure by answering the request of the Episcopal Bishop of Jerusalem, Hosan Naoum, to support his peacemaking efforts by giving to his diocese. He spoke at my seminary's convocation two days ago, by video link rather than in person for obvious reasons, projecting more optimism and hope than I would have expected, and requesting our support. I made a gift, and if you want to join me, we'll send out information later this week.

In many ways, our sacred present gives glory to God. God's feast is available to ourselves and all the people of the wider community because of the gratitude and generosity that exist within us, and because we express those feelings outwardly by supporting Advent with our time, talent, and money. All three are essential. All three glorify God. Every week, we prepare the banquet, and we prepare ourselves. We recommit ourselves to answering God's call, to following Christ, to living in the Spirit. We lift up our hearts, we sing God's praises, we greet all comers, we keep the feast. Our time and money are finite, but our gratitude, our commitment, and our love know no bounds but the ones we impose. Therefore, our greatest ability, our capacity to delight and glorify our God, is also unlimited.

God gives much to be grateful for, and God calls us to live in a different way from the

entitled, materialistic, violent world. In our nightmares we may feel unready, but in the waking world we are continually choosing how we are dressed. God's will for us is not for us to be anxious, but to be prepared, proactive, positive, or in a word, generous. So God blesses us, giving us every opportunity to be ready, to improve who we are and to express the greater goodness of our inner selves. Seize the opportunity. There's no reason to be afraid, and no time like the present.