

Dressed for Action

Proper 14, Year C – Luke 12:32-40

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, August 11, 2019

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

During my sabbatical leave time, I got to try on several “uniforms” that are different from what most of you have gotten used to seeing me wear. On Sunday mornings, of course, I get to get dressed up in the remnants of Byzantine court dress, but by the time I get to coffee hour, I have usually gotten back to a suit and a black clerical shirt, itself the remnant of medieval monk's habit. If you catch me on a day off, you might find me in jeans and one of the button-down casual shirts that some of the kids long ago dubbed “Fr. Rich shirts.” But most of the time during the week, I wear one of those clergy shirts – yes, I know it looks like there is just one shirt, but there is actually half a closet full of them – it's a real sight, I assure you – during the week, I generally pair one of those shirts with some slacks, and when it is cooler, maybe a sport jacket.

There was only one time during my sabbatical that I put on the clerical attire, but there were a great many other uniforms that I had the chance to try on for size in these last few months. To travel light and comfortable in Israel, for example – someday we'll compare the bag I carried to Dcn. Larry's – I wore a pair of high-tech, quick-drying, rip-stop tactical cargo pants I bought off the Internet, and a rotation of just four shirts – none of them black – with rolled up long sleeves, that I rolled down when the sun got to be too much. I topped my outfit off with my white, pseudo-straw fedora, hoping it gave me a kind of hairy, Indiana Jones look. By the time I had made my way down Florida's Gulf coast to go sailing on Buttonwood Sound off Key Largo, I had invested in a couple lighter weight long-sleeve shirts with built-in SPF sun protection, and specifically designed to wick away sweat. To single-hand the 22-foot sailboat that came with my lodging at the Key Lime Sailing Club, I paired one of these shirts with a ball cap I got during my last trip to Belize and, remembering to liberally apply sunscreen to my whiter-than-white legs, an old pair of cargo shorts, something most of you have never seen me in, unless you have invited me to a pool party or have been among the volunteers going with our young people to Holiday World. And the outfit that one puts together for scuba, or even snorkeling, well [looking at watch] perhaps I'll save the details for another time, but suffice it to say that if you don't dress properly for underwater exploration, you've got bigger problems than whether your belt goes with your shoes. Each of these outfits served their respective purpose, each was suited (pun intended) well suited to the work I was hoping to accomplish.

“Be dressed for action!” Jesus says in our Gospel lesson this morning. The lovely language of the old King James Version says, “Let your loins be girded.” In ancient times in Palestine, a man wore long robes. As you might imagine, those got in the way of hard, hands-on work. Two thousand years ago, if you wanted to change the oil in your car, say, or sharpen the lawnmower blade, instead of putting on your relaxed-fit Wranglers, you would reach down and gather those robes up and tuck them under your girdle belt to free yourself to get the job done.

Today, if you work on cars you might wear some blue-grey coveralls, perhaps with your name over here – “Bob.” If you're a broker or a lawyer or a banker, you'll wear a crisp light shirt, a tasteful tie if you're a guy, perhaps with a dark suit. If you're a college professor, it's a tweed jacket with khakis or maybe even jeans. If you work at Sureway or Applebee's or the bank (on Fridays) or any number of other places I could think of, it's a polo shirt with some little logo. If you're a nurse, it's scrubs. Firefighters have their turn-out gear. Police have their blues. Soldiers have their mottled camouflage. I knew for sure I was back from sabbatical, a week and a half ago when I reached into my closet to pull out one of those clerical shirts. Put on any of these outfits, and everyone knows what you're up to – you're ready to get to work, you are dressed for action.

“Let your loins be girded,” says the Lord. “Be dressed for action!”

Actually our Gospel reading this morning starts out not with that command, but with a glorious promise, doesn't it? “Fear not, little flock,” Jesus says, “for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Now that's what I call the Gospel – the Good News. The good news is that God

wants nothing more, and certainly nothing less for us, than that we should all inherit everything that is his.

The trouble is, we don't really see it most of the time. That's because, living and working where we do, we all suffer from a serious defect of vision. We call it sin, and because of that sin way back in Chapter 3 of everything, and because of every sin since then, and right down to a moment or so ago, we look out at the world with vision that is blurred, and clouded, and sometimes totally obscured, by our desire to see only what we want to see.

In the tremendous gift of the Kingdom of God, though, things are changed. Through the grace of Jesus Christ, we are enabled to see the world as God sees it – not for the limits and the distortion and the corruption that it is, but for the healing and the beauty and the wholeness that it can be. Living in the Kingdom, we are given the sight to see the hurt of the world – and want to do something to heal it. Living in the Kingdom, we are able to see the beauty of love – and are given the longing to embrace it. Living in the Kingdom, we are able to see our own shortcomings and failures – and we receive the power, and perhaps more importantly, the will, to be made whole. And Jesus says that it is the Father's pleasure to give us all that.

Interestingly, the one that brought the Kingdom of God to us, was first dressed for that work in swaddling clothes to keep the chill night air from his all too mortal flesh. The one who came to tell us about the Kingdom of God, dressed for that profound work not in the robes of a priest or a scribe or a learned teacher of the law, but in the simple seamless weave of a worker with his hands. The one whose work it was to show us what the Kingdom of God is all about, wrapped himself like a slave in a towel of service, and did for those that called him master, what they were slow to do for one another. In the end, the one whose work was to be in himself the Kingdom of God, was stripped of his robes, spit upon, and nailed to the hard wood of the cross. He lived and died to bring us the Kingdom, dressed in the reality and the frailty and the finality of our own so-human flesh.

They dressed him in the clothing of the dead, this bringer of the Kingdom, and they laid him in a tomb. But when they came to see him, the only thing left, were those stinking, useless shrouds. You see, dear friends, those burial rags were no fit garment... for the risen King of Glory! And seated on Heaven's throne, Jesus Christ is dressed for action!

And what's more, shrouds of death and destruction and decay, are not for any of us who have been reborn into the Kingdom of God. The shrouds of fear and worry and doubt are not for those of us who are called to live and to work for the Kingdom of God. The shrouds of despair and denial and defeat are not for those of us who are heirs to the Kingdom that our Father so longingly wants us to live into. We who are his, are called to gird up our loins for the work we have been given to do, to love God with everything we have, and to love each other just as fiercely. We are called to put on right now the brilliant white robes of his redeemed, to be dressed for action in the amazing and never-ending love of God.

I've told you before, and I want you to always know, what an honor and privilege it is to be invited as a priest to share in your life – in your good times and in your hard times. But God's work isn't confined to those of us who wear long white robes, or basic black and backward collars. The work of Jesus Christ is out there, being done by all of us who have been baptized into his holy name, by all of us who have been given the Kingdom of God. Our Father takes every one of us, transforms every one of us, and calls every one of us right back into the world to be a witness to what he has done, what he can do, and what he is doing, in and through even me... and you.

"Don't be afraid, little flock," Jesus says, "the Kingdom is yours." "Now, be ready for the work I have given you." "Let your loins be girded." "Be dressed... for action."