

"Attractional Outreach"

Scripture: Jeremiah 13:1-11; Titus 2:1-14

Hymns: Fairest Lord Jesus 375, Jesus Bids us Shine 773, God bless your church with strength 491

Contemporary Songs: Days of Elijah, You are the Vine

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We all wear clothing for its utility.

It covers our naked bodies.

In our cold climate, in our wilderness environment,  
it keeps us safe and warm.

But if that was the only reason for clothing  
we'd still be wearing onesies or overalls.

Most of us also wear clothing as a means of adornment.

We chose garments that enhance our appearance  
and showcase our God-given features.

On special occasions

She wears that silk scarf.

It is certainly beautiful in its own right,  
But she wears it for another reason:  
It draws attention to her eyes.

Her eyes have always won her compliments.

She'll never forget hearing one person describing them as  
'blue like the sky, right before the sun disappears'

We all wear clothing for its utility.

And clothing is also an adornment.

We keep the clothing  
That make us look good.

And we toss out the attire  
That make us look bad:  
items that are stained or torn or faded;  
Clothing that simply never fit.

Now you may be thinking...  
I didn't come to church for a reflection on fashion.

But if you've been paying attention this morning  
you will have noticed that our passage from the Book of Jeremiah  
talks about clothing: a linen loincloth... a kilt.

Before we dig into the story  
Let me remind you about the book it comes from  
and its namesake.

As far as jobs go, the work of prophets is never easy.  
The prophet Jeremiah was given the unpleasant task  
of "[addressing] a nation about to be destroyed by war.

Three hundred years before him,  
the Israelites had split into two countries,  
Israel in the North and Judah in the South.

About 100 years before Jeremiah,  
Assyria had conquered the Northern Kingdom.  
This disaster was "World War I" in Old Testament history.

Now, during Jeremiah's life, World War II threatened.  
Another fierce kingdom, Babylon,  
assembled troops against the remaining Southern Kingdom...

Jeremiah loudly insisted for more than 20 years  
that God would punish Judah  
just as he had [disciplined] Israel by letting Babylon  
take them into captivity".<sup>i</sup>

That's the story and the work of Jeremiah.

We see an example of Jeremiah's work  
In today's Old Testament lesson.  
In today's lesson he performs a parable of judgement  
With a piece of clothing.

Let me retell the story..

It was shopping day for Jeremiah.  
He needed a new kilt, and God told him just what to buy:  
one made of sparkling fresh white linen.

We can imagine Jeremiah  
Parading these new duds  
Through the streets of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah is walking a little taller than usual.  
People are admiring him.  
This man is dressed to bless!  
This man is looking sharp!

But God tells him to take off his new kilt.  
And bury it in a bank by the river.  
Jeremiah is to leave his new purchase  
to the mercy of the elements: sun, wind, rain.

Jeremiah obeys God.

Sometime later God sends Jeremiah back to unearth the kilt  
and retrieve it from the mud.

To no-one's surprise  
This new kilt is now ragged:  
ruined and completely useless.

We aren't told how far Jeremiah went in enacting the drama  
But we can imagine that if he put the kilt back on  
He'd be getting looks—  
but this time for the wrong reasons—  
people would think he was homeless.<sup>ii</sup>

Now remember that this story is a parable.  
So what is Jeremiah trying to teach us?

If you turn to the passage  
You'll find the interpretation.

The kilt, that loincloth is God's people.  
The one who is wearing it, is God.  
The relationship is shown to be close, intimate:  
Like cloth on skin.

But more than that,  
it's a purposeful relationship.  
Just as a garment is designed to make its owner look good  
The people of God, exist for God's honor and praise.

But what happens?

The kilt is separated from its owner.  
And in this process, it is soiled and ruined.  
It is no longer fit for adornment;  
It is 'good for nothing'.

In the same way  
When the people wander from God  
They lose their Godly character.  
And instead of bringing God honor  
They end up making God look bad.

What Jeremiah teaches in his parable  
We often see acted out in real life.

We encounter those who claim an association with God;  
People who proudly claim to be Christians.

They all claim an association with God  
But in their hearts are far from him.

Through their immoral inclinations,  
Their bullying behaviors,  
Their selfish spirit  
They do nothing that makes God look attractive.

Instead they make God look bad.

We encounter this story again and again.

It should serve as a warning to us,

To watch our hearts and guard our behavior

So that we don't bring God's name into disrepute.

But if there is guilt by association

We can also focus on the flip-side:

Our actions can make God look bad.

And our actions can make God look good.

If we turn to our New Testament passage

We find Paul encouraging good works, good behavior

Not just so that God's work will not be discredited,

But so that onlookers might be enticed:

"Guide slaves into being loyal workers,

a bonus to their masters—no back talk, no petty thievery.

Then their good character will shine through their actions,

adding luster to the teaching of our Savior God."<sup>iii</sup>

Sometimes we act as if

Only a direct intervention of God will change a person's heart:

"That needs to have an encounter with the Holy Spirit!"

We tend to forget that God has determined

To use us in making God attractive.

And I'm not just building an argument on the basis  
Of a rather obscure Old Testament passage.

One blogger notes various calls in Scripture  
That focus on attractional outreach:

"What [about] Jesus' call for us to be light of the world?  
This certainly means that someone  
could see God's light shining through us.

What [about] Jesus' call for us to be salt of the earth?  
This certainly means someone  
could be positively affected by our lifestyle...

What [about] Jesus' call for us to [a] be city on the hill?  
This certainly means that someone could see  
that there is something different about us...

What [about that call to be] "written epistles?" ...  
Our talk must match our walk for others to take notice...

[And what about] Jesus' high priestly prayer,  
when he prayed for love and unity among believers?  
A love and unity that will cause the world  
to believe in who he is..."<sup>iv</sup>

A quick survey of Scripture reveals that followers of Jesus  
Are to live in ways that make God look good.

As one commentator notes:

“the world will see no reason  
to pay any attention to our claims about our invisible God  
if it sees no visible difference  
between the lives of those who make such claims  
and those who don’t.”<sup>v</sup>

This means intentionally embracing God’s call

To “self-controlled, upright, and godly” living;

This means determining every day to embrace Jesus’ teaching  
and live in the power of the Holy Spirit.

But what if we sense

That somehow we are lacking

Evidence of God’s work in our lives.

What if see our own need for personal transformation,

So we can be that attractive garment: that kilt, that scarf,  
that will ultimately draw people to God.

Well maybe we need to spend more time

In God’s transformative presence;

take time to abide in the Vine.

This was part of Jeremiah’s message.

The people became that useless unwearable kilt,

Only when they went their own way,

Only then they failed stay close to God.



I don't imagine that many of you have heard  
 Of St. Serafim of Sarov.  
 As Ross Lockhart mentioned last week  
 Venerating special saints is not part of our tradition.

We believe we are all saints.

That being said it is valuable considering the example  
 Of other Christians.  
 And St. Serafin has been described as the  
 "Russian equivalent of St. Francis of Assisi".<sup>vi</sup>

"During his lifetime (1759-1833)  
 He spent nearly thirty years  
 in his hermitage deep in the Russian forest,  
 listening to [God]."

For thirty years he cut out other distractions  
 So he could get to know God  
 So that he could be shaped by God.

And what was the result?  
 Did his solitary life make him eccentric and strange  
 And unable to connect with others?

Not so.

"[Serafim] spent the last twenty years of his life  
 involved in a bustling ministry  
 of counselling, prayer, spiritual direction and healing.

Out of [the wholeness he found] in Christ,  
 he became a spiritual father to thousands...  
 Jesus' presence poured into him and through him  
 until his words and even his face  
 brought healing to broken lives..."<sup>vii</sup>

Very few of us have the time or opportunity  
 To go on a pilgrimage  
 Let alone spend a few decades in the wilderness.

But we all have a few moments in each day  
 Whether we are gathering our thoughts in the morning  
 Or a driving from one appointment to another...

We all have a few moments in each day to draw near to God  
 And let God draw near to us.

I wonder what would happen if everyone here  
 Took this task seriously...  
 I wonder how our lives be transformed  
 by Christ's presence...

I wonder how our lives might start making God look good.

Let us pray...

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<sup>i</sup> See NIV Student Bible with notes by Philip Yancey and Tim Stafford 660-661

<sup>ii</sup> This retelling is largely borrowed from: Christopher J. H. Wright *The Mission of God's People* 137

<sup>iii</sup> Titus 2:9-10 MSG

<sup>iv</sup> Walter Bright "You are the only Jesus some will ever see..." blog post July 20, 2013 <http://walterbright.org/2013/07/20/you-are-the-only-jesus-some-will-ever-see/>

<sup>v</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright *The Mission of God's People* 132

<sup>vi</sup> Matt Woodley *The Folly of Prayer* 155

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid