

1 Sermon, April 10, 2011

Texts: Job 24:1-11, Isaiah 20:1-6, Matthew 27:27-44

Title: "Nakedness and Poverty"

1. Nakedness = wretchedness, poverty, the final insult
2. God turns wretchedness to abundance
3. Jesus's life went full circle, back to poverty

1. Nakedness = wretchedness, poverty, the final insult

If you were to read only the scripture readings for today, and no other part of the Bible, you might become depressed.

The words on Job's lips, for instance, talk about people doing evil to other people: defrauding them of land, stealing other people's sheep, pushing the needy out of the way, loaning out money after taking an ox as collateral — an ox you can use to plow your own field until they pay back the loan. And, because of the evil of some people, others suffer:

They lie all night naked, without clothing, and have no covering in the cold. They are wet with the rain of the mountains, and cling to the rock for want of shelter. . . . They go about naked, without clothing; though hungry, they carry the sheaves; between their terraces they press out oil; they tread the wine presses, but suffer thirst." Job 24:1-11, NRSV.

Why so much emphasis on nakedness in the passage? Because being naked was the final insult. You might lose your livestock, even your land, even your home, but it was only the truly wretched who had no clothing.

The Bible looks at nakedness as shameful, as an invasion of privacy, as a terrible condition because you don't have the protection of clothing. But here in these readings we see that nakedness also stands for terrible, grinding poverty.

When the Bible was written, most people were poor. Most people lived near the edge, barely making it. But not even to have clothing, that was as low as you could go.

Proverbs 10:15 says, "The wealth of the rich is their fortress; the poverty of the poor is their ruin."

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Isaiah, we read in that prophet's book, walked around naked for three years. Scholars wonder how literally to take that, if in this case it meant totally naked, and if someone could really do that for three years. However much unclothed Isaiah was, it was to illustrate something — the wretchedness of Egypt and Ethiopia.

Isaiah was not saying that Egypt and Ethiopia would be shamed, he was saying by his actions that they would be impoverished. They would be vulnerable, at the mercy of others.

2. God turns wretchedness to abundance

Most of the time nakedness is mentioned in the Bible, it is to remind us how bad things can get. People can endure tremendous deprivation, to the point of not even having enough to wear.

But that's only the first half of the story. God then enters the scene and turns sorrow into dancing, wretchedness into abundance.

From the very beginning, Christian faith has been about snatching victory out of apparent defeat! Jesus was not defeated on the cross. It seemed like he was defeated, and indeed he suffered horribly, and then died. But the story didn't end there.

Jesus didn't lose to the powers that be. The authority figures put him to death, and thought they had won. They thought Jesus had been reduced to utter wretchedness, and indeed he had.

But they hadn't counted on the power of God.

They had simply left God out of the equation.

Jesus' story is our story. We may be shamed, it may seem that all is lost, but we are not defeated. God is still in the story.

3. Jesus's life went full circle, back to poverty

You know, I originally planned to talk next week about the theme of nakedness as it relates to the cross. And next week we will read the story and think about the cross. But as I looked at today's theme, and studied it, I realized I *had* to talk about the cross this week, too.

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When Jesus was hung naked on the cross, it made clear the wretchedness of being naked. Jesus was helpless, poor, exposed, and humiliated on the cross.

When the Romans crucified people, it was to shame and humiliate. Those on the cross bled: naked to the weather, and to everybody walking by. They were hung there to slowly suffocate as the weight of their bodies made it harder and harder to breathe.

Crucifixion was an example to the occupied population; if you cross us, we will *cross* you. Literally. It was intended for deterrence.

Little did the Romans know that Christians would turn that ugly cross into a symbol of triumph. What had once been the picture of painful death became the symbol of joyful life.

God simply turned it all around. The nakedness of the cross, which represented grinding poverty and humiliation, became a symbol for God's sheltering, protecting, abundant love.

That's really what God is about.

That's really, as Paul Harvey said, "the rest of the story."

Job, who described sorrow and poverty and evil and nakedness went on to hear God speak to him from a whirlwind. Job discovered deep meaning in the midst of his suffering. And Job was blessed by God.

Isaiah, who followed God's command and lived a wretched, naked three years, was later able to convey to his people a message that meant hope for them. Isaiah wrote in chapter 43:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

And the gospel reading shows that the naked wretchedness of the cross brings us full circle. Jesus, who was born away from home and laid in a feed trough (an image of poverty and displacement), died away from home and friends, poor and helpless.

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Yet at his birth the angels sang, and at his death the power of God is made plain. That's the Christian story.

It's a story that begins with paradise in the Garden of Eden, and will end with the paradise that Jesus promised to the thief on the next cross. It's a story of life and death and new life.

It is true in our lives, too.

Edmond Gilbert, of Little Rock, Arkansas, was shamed. After the company he had worked for closed, he found odd jobs, but he and his family were falling behind in their rent. Soon a fire severely damaged their house, and they had to move in temporarily with relatives. Then their furniture was stolen from the damaged house.

And soon, they had to move out of the relatives' house, because it was just too crowded. So they had nowhere else to go but a homeless shelter. Mr. Gilbert was deeply ashamed of this. He had been raised to work hard and provide for his family. He was bitter, and very angry at himself for having fallen so far. He hated being seen at the shelter, and eating with the other residents. He felt wretched. But his bitterness became unbearable when, after his first paycheck from a landscaping job, he found that he could not buy new clothing for his daughters. He had to put 70 percent of his paycheck into a savings fund managed by the homeless shelter for their family. The shelter would provide them with clothing.

So he went to the shelter director, Mrs. DeFoggi. "You shouldn't be giving my children clothes, Gilbert said. "It isn't right."

"No, it isn't, Mr. Gilbert," said Mrs. DeFoggi. "Nothing is right about being homeless. I know that you don't want to be here. But the fact remains that you *are* here. While you are, let us help you."

That night, Gilbert took out his Bible and read and prayed. "I am here, God. And so are you. Help me."

The sense of wretchedness began to melt away, and soon Gilbert found himself reaching out to other residents, and easing their burdens. When an old man went to the shelter, angry at being there, Gilbert offered him a glass of water, and then just listened for an hour as the man poured out his troubles. That old man became his special charge.

Gilbert's nine months in a homeless shelter started out as an experience of utter helplessness, but was transformed into an experience of healing.

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God turns helplessness and wretchedness into healing. God turns weaknesses into strength.

You may remember Terry Anderson, the reporter who was released in 1991 after being held hostage in Beirut for more than six years. He looks back on his ordeal and remembers cruelty and pain, with only mice for companions.

But he says: "Before my capture I was a brusque, arrogant, restless man. Now I like to think that I have changed."

He learned a lot in his captivity, much of it from a worn red Bible that his captors gave to him.

God turns wretchedness into abundance and healing.

That's part of our history. The Methodist movement began among the poor, who were offered the hope of the good news of Jesus.

Thanks be to God for this marvelous news.

Amen.

"Why are times not kept by the Almighty, and why do those who know him never see his days? The wicked remove landmarks; they seize flocks and pasture them. They drive away the donkey of the orphan; they take the widow's ox for a pledge. They thrust the needy off the road; the poor of the earth all hide themselves. Like wild asses in the desert they go out to their toil, scavenging in the wasteland food for their young. They reap in a field not their own and they glean in the vineyard of the wicked. They lie all night naked, without clothing, and have no covering in the cold. They are wet with the rain of the mountains, and cling to the rock for want of shelter. "There are those who snatch the orphan child from the breast, and take as a pledge the infant of the poor. They go about naked, without clothing; though hungry, they carry the sheaves; between their terraces they press out oil; they tread the wine presses, but suffer thirst." Job 24:1-11, NRSV.