

PUT ON YOUR HAPPY CLOTHES

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
The Second Sunday of Advent
December 5, 2021

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. (Baruch 5:1)

On Friday night it was my joy to attend the Grace Church Choral Society's Christmas concert, and I was pleased to see that one of their selections was *Hark! the herald angels sing* – always a favorite of mine. But would you believe that every year certain hyper-theological Scrooges take exception to the lyrics of the hymn? They call it *Hark! the heresy* because they believe the phrase, “veiled in flesh, the Godhead seen” suggests that Jesus' humanity was only a costume, a veil, not the real thing. They don't like *Away in a manger* for the same reason. The critics think the line about Jesus' not crying implies he was only pretending to be a baby, and wasn't fully human. That's a heresy, and it won't do. As for me, I'd like to pour the theological Scrooges a stiff glass of eggnog, and lead him in a rousing chorus of *Have a Holly Jolly Christmas*. I love Christmas carols, even if the lyrics occasionally lack theological precision. You know, sometimes you just have to do what it takes to complete the rhyme.

When I was little my favorite carol of all was *Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly*. The reason, of course, is that *Deck the Halls* has my name in the lyrics: “Don we now our gay apparel.” Discovering my name in a carol was a big deal. You see, it pulled me even with my older brother Stephen, whose name appears prominently in *Good King Wenceslas*. Truthfully, I had no idea what “don we now our gay apparel” could possibly mean. It was enough that my name was there. In time, however, I would need more. So one day I asked my grandmother as she sat at the piano “Grandma, what *does* ‘don we now our gay apparel’ mean?” Mind you now, this was the 1960's, so the phrase would have none of the nuances it has today. I distinctly remember my grandmother not even missing a beat and saying, “Well, it means to put on your happy clothes.” “*Tis the season to be jolly – put on your happy clothes.*” It made sense to me, and to this day *Deck the Halls* remains one of my favorite secular carols.

Deck the Halls would also be the favorite carol of Baruch, the writer of today's first reading (5:1-9). Listen again to what he said: *Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting.* Baruch was telling his readers to put on their happy clothes. “Don we now our gay apparel” is how he might have sung it. But who was Baruch? To be honest, we don't really know. The prophet Jeremiah had a scribe named Baruch. Jeremiah preached some six-hundred years before Jesus, at the time the Jews were taken into Babylonian captivity. But the little book we know as Baruch – a book that's actually in the Apocrypha, not the Old Testament – clearly comes from a later time, perhaps only two-hundred years before Jesus. So we don't know whether Baruch was addressing the exiled Jews in Babylon, or the scattered Jews of the Diaspora, or the occupied Jews in Jerusalem. What is clear, however, is that Baruch wrote for times of sorrow and affliction. The fortunes of Jerusalem had been plundered. Either the people had been conquered and led away into exile. Or they had been conquered and were living under some foreign occupation. The key word here is conquered. Anyone who has suffered terrible, crushing grief, or a devastating loss of livelihood and lifestyle knows the garment of sorrow and affliction that Jerusalem wore.

Whoever Baruch was, his writing nevertheless anticipates an event for which Jerusalem would want to find some happy clothes and don them. It would be an occasion of unparalleled joy. What was going to happen? God was going to carry home everyone who had been dragged away by death, marched off into exile, and scattered into the Diaspora. God was going to reconstitute Israel in the here and now, and reunite the people in the sight of all. Baruch was issuing an invitation to climb the parapets of Jerusalem and watch it happen: *Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that God has remembered them.*

The party that Baruch described would be nothing short of an arrival ceremony to welcome heaven to earth. The image of a great gathering of people watching the powers of death turned back illustrates and anticipates everything that God is working to accomplish in creation. Indeed, the arrival of heaven on earth is still our Advent hope today. Let's be clear about something: during Advent we aren't getting ready to celebrate the arrival of a cute baby two-thousand years ago. And we aren't preparing for a cataclysmic end of all things. The Advent hope is neither about sentimentality nor the apocalypse. Rather, the Advent hope looks to the time when we in this mortal life can know God on earth as God is known in heaven. God made himself known in creation itself. God made himself known in the calling of Israel to be his people. God made himself known in the Word made flesh, Jesus. Now our hope and expectation is for when we can welcome heaven to earth again – to your life and mine. To be sure, God is working to arrange the marriage of heaven and earth, but when? Soon. When you least expect it. God's messengers the prophets tell us that the time is at hand to get your happy clothes out of moth balls. You have an invitation to attend the arrival ceremony of God.

Really? The arrival of heaven on earth, you say? Many hold back, or at least try to manage their expectations for any number of good reasons. Frankly, the only thing that seems to be arriving these days is yet another variant of Covid-19. It was back in June when we first welcomed what we assumed to be the return of normal times. We took off our masks of sorrow and affliction. Then the Delta variant crashed the party and it was back to face coverings and even vaccine mandates. But we looked forward to Christmas as the confirmed cases in New York City plummeted. Is it time to celebrate? No, now we have the arrival of the Omicron variant and a renewed call to don our masks and get a booster shot. Put on your happy clothes? We might rightly mistrust Baruch's invitation because we've been down this road before only to be disappointed.

We might also question the legitimacy of Baruch himself. I mean, if the list of Biblical prophets were a Christmas carol, you would search in vain for the name Baruch. His name is not to be found in the lyrics. So beware of any promises he makes. Don't be fooled. False prophets have led many astray. Friday's edition of *The New York Times* included the obituary of a Christian broadcaster named Marcus Lamb. Sadly, Lamb used his media empire and considerable reach to sow suspicion of Covid vaccines and recommend alternative, widely discredited drugs. He died on November 30th at age 64. The cause of death? Ironically, Covid-19. Beware of false prophets. Marcus Lamb was one of them. Who is to say Baruch isn't another. So put away your happy clothes forever. The marriage between heaven and earth has been a sham all along.

So speaks a cynical world, and the cynics aren't always wrong. But then, into the wilderness of our sorrow and affliction, a voice cries out: *Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.* John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What he meant by repentance was to take off the old so that you can put on the new. I think of a particular marriage-feast parable that Jesus told. Do you remember the scene when the wedding guest arrived at the reception in his old clothing, and not his happy clothes (Matthew 22:11-14)?

The host had him thrown into the outer darkness. The man wouldn't repent. The man wouldn't take off the old clothes, the old attitudes, the old prejudices, the old pre-conceived notions about God and existence. The man wouldn't take off the old garment of sorrow and affliction so that he could put on the new wedding garment of hope and expectation. As Baruch, before John the Baptist said, *Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.*

Baruch again? Can we trust Baruch? We can. You see, Baruch's name may not appear in the lyrics of the prophets, but he was certainly singing the prophets' tune. Baruch sang in perfect harmony with Isaiah when he proclaimed in today's reading: *For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.* Isaiah, Baruch, and John the Baptist all sing the song: *Don we now our gay apparel. Put on your happy clothes.* What does it mean? It's not a lecture to stop being sad. It's not a command to have a holly, jolly Christmas. It's not a call to deny certain feelings that you have good cause to feel. Rather, it's a call to live in confidence that God began a good work in you, and God will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6). It's a call to be dressed and ready for the next time God arrives, whether it be in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, or today, the Second Sunday of Advent. Be dressed and ready for the arrival of God, even today.

What does being dressed and ready look like in the ordinary lives we live? Many of you know that in August my mother died just shy of her 91st birthday. Last weekend we had a houseful of extended family, first for Thanksgiving and then to commit Mom's ashes to the ground in a cemetery in Union, NJ. There in a family plot I saw for the first time in many years the grave of my piano-playing grandmother. Beside her is my grandfather, James George Knodel, also a major figure in my life. For over thirty years my grandfather owned and operated a small, commercial ice and coal business. It was a backbreaking job: grimy, greasy, sweaty, depending on the season. The ice docks of Newark where he drove his truck were controlled by the mob. Rough people would often block his way. It was never how he wanted to earn his living.

My grandfather easily could have spent the best years of his life despairing over the hand he'd been dealt, but he didn't. Instead, he chose another way. Every evening he would stage his own protest that to me beautifully illustrates the spirit of what Baruch was commending. He would come home exhausted and dirty. He would take off the garments of his sorrow and affliction. He would change out of his dirty work clothes, shower, and put on a white dress shirt and neck tie. For him, these were the beauty of the glory from God he was meant to wear. These were his armor of light against the powers of darkness. These were his happy clothes. I remember my grandfather always wearing a white shirt and tie, even when he was just relaxing around the house, even after he retired. He never would have described it in Biblical terms, but it was as if at the end of the day he wanted to be dressed and ready to stand on the parapets of Jerusalem, and greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ, our Redeemer.

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on your happy clothes. Put on the armor of light. Cast away the works of darkness, now in the time of this mortal life. Then when Christ comes again in his glorious majesty to judge the world, we may without shame or fear rejoice to behold his appearing.