

## Putting on New Clothes

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1 Samuel 2: 18-20, 26; Colossians 3: 12-17

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I was all prepared for this Sunday's sermon when I heard the rumors that Saddam Hussein would be executed this weekend. I tried not to think about it. Like many of you, I experience a great deal of war fatigue just hearing the incessant reports of what's going on in Iraq, exhaustion which is compounded by the fact that I never supported this war in the first place. I didn't even support this nation going to Afghanistan, despite the fact that the leader of Al-Qaeda was reported to be taking refuge there, and I certainly didn't support the invasion of a country that had nothing to do with 9-11. And I never believed that any of this was about the liberation of a people oppressed by a despot – there are many tyrants in many places in the world, and we aren't on a mission of liberation there. What's more, the American people often seem unconcerned about the basic human rights of their own citizens, so how could we suddenly profess this sort of passion for people in other lands?

I, and many others, have said before that war is a great evil in the eyes of God. There may be times where the greater evil is to do nothing in the face of tyranny, but we cannot deny that war always represents the failure of humanity to live up to God's call for creation to live in peace and harmony on this earth. War always represents our fallenness from grace.

The more I tried not to think about what was going on in Iraq, the more it invaded my senses. It was everywhere – on the radio, on the television, even in the papers, although the press time must have been so early for the Des Moines Register that its news was already out-of-date by the time it reached me. What's more, it was in my head. I recalled how the people there do not seem to want us there anymore. I saw how people began to refer to us not as "liberators" but as "occupiers." I remembered Jesus' words "Blessed are the peacemakers," and I was ashamed to think what Jesus might say about the irony of the U.S. attempting to bring peace through physical violence and force.

And now, Saddam Hussein is dead, and many in the world gloat. But for Christians, there can be no gloating over the death of one of God's children. For just as surely as you and I are children of God, we can be assured that Saddam Hussein, too, is our brother in this way. It is true that he abused what had been given to him by his nation and by God. It is true that he used his power to oppress and to kill. It is true that he deserved punishment for his crimes. But it is also true that he was a child of God, created in the image of God and in whom the Spirit of God resided, however deeply hidden that spark may have been. For this reason, we can only offer our lamentation that this man has been killed, and repentance for our part in his execution.

The death penalty, like war itself, represents our failure as humans to live up to God's intentions for creation. We rob our brothers and sisters of the opportunity to repent for their sins by taking their lives, and in the taking of human life we ourselves commit a grave sin by demonstrating that we are no better than the one who has been sentenced to death. War and executions are a part of our broken, sinful world, not a part of the world God intends us to live. What's more, we in the church have been guilty of supporting this broken, sinful system by our failure to recognize the

Holy in those with whom our nation is at war. Fleming Rutledge, an Episcopal priest and speaker, has lamented publicly that while most of the churches she has been to frequently pray for U.S. soldiers overseas, they seldom if ever pray for innocent Iraqis, and certainly never pray for our enemies in the Middle East or elsewhere in the world.

Paul's letter to the Colossians offers an alternate vision of how we are to live. Paul writes that as "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved," we are to "clothe [ourselves] with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience...and above all, love." What could this mean for our time? Compassion requires us to look through the world through the eyes of The Other, to put aside our own set of eyes and to try to see with their vision. We in the United States have thoroughly explained our point of view – that we are there to liberate from a tyrant, that we want the people in the Middle East to live in a democracy, that we want the Iraqis to be free. But have we seen the situation from their eyes? Have we thought about what it meant to have their leader overthrown by an outside force? Have we considered that their leader was able to enforce a sort of stability that enabled ordinary life to continue, even if it is not the life we would have chosen for ourselves? In other words, have we looked at the situation through the eyes of the Iraqis, even the insurgents there? When we recognize The Other as a human being like ourselves, we can identify with them and begin to understand how we would like to be treated in the same situation.

When we can see the world through another's eyes, it is far easier to be kind to them. We do not have to agree with their point of view, but when we can understand it, it is harder to dismiss out-of-hand. The Golden Rule of doing unto others as we would like done to us suddenly becomes easier, at least in principle.

Humility and meekness are next. Because we may not ever fully comprehend what it meant to live in the Iraqi context under Saddam or following his overthrow, we should take great care not to assume that we do. We should listen carefully to the people living there, opening ourselves to truths that may be difficult to hear, and be willing to change our hearts and minds in response. Simply because we CAN do something does not mean that we SHOULD do something, or even that others WANT us to do it. We can wait to act until we are asked to act, and only then should we consider what actions are appropriate for us to do. Humility and meekness demand that we put our needs after the needs of others.

Perhaps the hardest of all is patience. Who has gotten impatient just listening to me explain these themes? We think we already know the answer and what the right course of action is. But are we open to the possibility that we may be wrong? Are we open to the possibility that there might be another alternative we have not yet considered? Is the situation so urgent that we simply must act now, or can we wait until we have more information? In the case of the war against Iraq, it was clear that the United States did not have the information it needed to justify its attacks. But we were impatient, and it has cost us credibility and support from all over the world.

"...and most of all, Love." Can we say that we are in this war because of our love for the Iraqi people? Or are we there because of our love for the way of life we currently lead? A life that includes the gluttonous consumption of natural resources, the desire to be free of all harm and pain no matter the cost to others, and the might to enforce our will on whomever we please. We are certainly not there killing people because we love God – Christ's execution on the cross made it abundantly clear that God does not wish there to be any more killing in the Lord's name, that no more death in God's name was necessary. Who or what do we love

Paul uses the imagery of clothing in this letter. He tells us we are to clothe ourselves with these things, to wrap ourselves up in these kinds of behaviors and attitudes, and in this way we will

demonstrate to the world that we have indeed “put on Christ” – that we are living in a new, countercultural way that reflects the values intended by God and made fully known to us in Jesus Christ.

At my ordination, following the prayers of the congregation and the gathered community, I received a number of gifts. My field ed church dressed me in my first robe – the robe I’m wearing today, in fact. And the church that had been my home for all of seminary had a gift for me. It was a lovely red stole, covered with gold stars and adorned with gold fringe. As my pastor, Pat DeJong, laid it across my shoulders, she admonished me kindly and quietly: “Remember that this is the yoke of Christ. Wear it with honor and humility.” Never has a piece of fabric felt so heavy and so light.

When we put on Christ by clothing ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and love, we are putting on clothes that are meant to differentiate us from the rest of the world and his destructive and self-seeking ways. When we wear the yoke of Christ, as indeed all of us are called to do, we are called to put aside our own needs and to tend first to the needs of those around us. So let us put on these new clothes and wear Christ in the world, opening ourselves to the voice of God and the will of God even if it comes from the mouths of our enemies, and offering our prayers for peace among the nations and peace in the hearts and lives of ourselves as well as those of our enemies. Amen.