

You Have to Wear Something

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*Editor's note: Briehl began her address by reading Luke 8:26–39, Jesus' healing of the naked man possessed by a legion of demons.

I begin with scripture. Where else could one start when invited to speak about preaching and its power of formation in the lives of hearers? How else can preaching shape a people for the living of this particular and peculiar life to which Jesus calls us, except we turn to scripture, tell its stories, sing its songs, cry its laments, pray its prayers, enter its wisdom, and taste the life it bears? We have no other word to proclaim than the promise of God, the mystery of God's unfailing love for the world revealed and offered to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God's Word made flesh among us.

The man in the story from Luke is held captive, occupied against his will by an army of demons who have taken away his dignity, his ability to think clearly and to speak for himself. They have robbed him of his home and his name. Cut off from his past, his future is a dead end. He lives in the tombs, and like the bones buried there, his community has declared him unclean. He has not worn clothes for a long time; his brutal nakedness speaks of all that has been taken from him. This man's story opens to us one way of thinking about the role of preaching in forming and reforming Christians: Through the preacher the Holy Spirit calls to us in our nakedness, wraps us in the wisdom and word of God, opens our eyes to this garment bestowed upon us at baptism, and forms us in ways befitting the clothes we wear.

Through the Preacher, the Holy Spirit Calls to Us in Our Nakedness

Stripped bare, this man stands before us. We hardly dare look at him, for when we do, we see ourselves. We are the willing and unwilling habitation of occupying powers: fear and failure, grief, greed, and guilt, anxiety and addiction, ignorance, arrogance, shame, and self-absorption. We break free of one set of chains only to submit to another. Our demons drive us from community into isolation, from God's abundant life into the place of the dead. Regret binds us to the past; despair freezes us in the

present moment; fear keeps us from living into the future. Just look at us: these powers have stripped us of our freedom—the freedom to live together as a people created by, enlivened with, and beloved of God.

We learn early and often what Adam and Eve discovered in the garden after they had reached beyond God's promises in order to secure their own futures: once trust has been broken, once fear inhabits the human heart, it is too dangerous, too deadly to live naked in the world. When we are exposed, we bend in shame, curling up into ourselves to cover our nakedness and save our own skin. In this position we cannot hear the cries of our hungry neighbors or reach in healing to those who suffer. Ever since those first fig-leaf fashions, human beings have known this truth: we are naked, and we have to wear something to live in this world.

So, we dress ourselves. We go to the ancient human wardrobe closet and choose our costume. Shall I wear my power suit today? Or should I put on my charming face? Moral righteousness doesn't fit and certainly not intellectual superiority. Ah, I'll wear "the-praise-of-others" dress—good in any season, goes with black pumps—except that it is part of an entire ensemble and must be worn with that wretched "fear-of-failure-I'm-such-a-fraud" jacket.

You know how it goes. We who long to appear wise and good and worthy, just *love* the classic cut of credentials: positions and publications, titles and degrees. We like the fuzzy feel of good deeds, the bright colors of righteous indignation. We who prefer urban chic dress in dark deceit and self-delusion, sneaking around like stealth bombers, dressing to go invisible. And then there are those of us who live to be robbed in the exquisite brocade of ecclesiastical vestments, gestures, and rites. Sometimes we dress so well we begin to believe our own charade, strutting around like the emperor in the stuff we own, the successes we've achieved, the power we wield in the world, until the least among us, those we call foolish, declare the truth: You have nothing on.

Our Sunday gathering often begins with this very declaration: "We are naked and cannot clothe ourselves." We turn toward the font and tell the naked truth about the brokenness of the world and our complicity in its breaking, that we have snipped away at the fragile web that holds all things together, rather than spinning a mending thread that would heal what has been torn. We admit we are occupied by a legion of powers and dwell among the tombs. Welcomed back to the water, we are invited to drop our pretenses, remove our masks, stop our masquerading. Every time we enter the nave and pass the font, touching its waters to ourselves, we are reminded that except for the promise made to us in baptism, except for the

garment of grace, Christ's very self bestowed upon us, we never would dare stand naked before God or one another.

The wise preacher seeks to know her own demons and those that inhabit the community she serves, in order to name the legion and speak truth to the occupying powers. She holds up the mirror in which the community can see what has been taken from them, distorted within them, and misshapen among them and how they have tried to cover themselves. She declares God's promise: when we are without power, place, or privilege, when we are stripped of every self-defense and unable to protect ourselves, Christ Jesus comes to us in our nakedness, clothing us in mercy.

Through the Preacher, the Spirit Wraps Us in the Wisdom and Word of God

Night after night, year after year, we have helped our daughters bring the day to a close with a common liturgy: after ablutions, we tuck them into bed with stories, prayers, kisses, and a blessing. When Mary Emily was very young, she named this ritual the tuck-me-in story, as in, "I brushed my teeth. I'm ready for a tuck-me-in story." One night her little sister, Magdalena, changed the accent slightly, and thus the meaning completely, when she began pleading, "Tuck me in *story*, Mama. Tuck me in *story*." It was as if she were asking to be inserted into a narrative, enfolded in story; as if she knew that she needed to be clothed in more than pajamas, swaddled in more than sheets and blankets, that she needed to be part of a story that came from outside herself and was bigger than she was in order to abandon herself to the helplessness of sleep.

Some story, good or evil, shapes our lives. Perhaps it is the story of immigrants who made the hard journey across deep waters, or beneath barbed wire fences past armed border guards, or in little wooden boats, fragile arks in the flood, risking everything for the sake of a more hopeful future. Such a story can form us for grateful hospitality and deep compassion toward every stranger, sojourner, and refugee. Or it can make us narrow-eyed and suspicious of anyone in whom we do not recognize ourselves, anyone who arrived later than we.

Maybe it's the story of unwilling bondage: cargo and commodity on a slave trading ship, childhoods stolen, marriages broken by abuse or addiction, unrelenting despair or doubt or depression. Stories like these can form us to seek out and care for the wounded and the weak, or they can fill us with perpetual blame or rage. Of course there are the national bestselling stories: God bless America, and God bless me; might makes

right; God helps those who help themselves. There is a legion of life-forming stories from which to choose or, choosing none, one will find us and possess us, occupying our dreams and inhabiting our deeds.

The preacher wraps the people in the stories of faith, the stories that tell us who we are and to whom we belong, the stories that bind us one to another and make of us one people. These stories will wholly transform us by renewing our minds, our eyes and ears, hands and hearts, that we may discern, see and hear, taste and touch what God is doing among us. We need to hear them until they are knit into the fiber of our bones and we are woven into the very fabric of The Story, the story of God's heart wounded and opened to us and the whole world in Christ Jesus.

Increasingly, we cannot assume that people, even the baptized, know these formative stories. Many do not "catch" the biblical references and allusions that weave the liturgy together. Take, for instance, the Sanctus. When the people sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy," can they imagine the whole scene in the temple: the smoke of the incense floating fragrantly overhead like the hem of God's skirt, Isaiah's unclean lips, the burning, cleansing coal, the antiphonal choir of seraphim?

When they sing, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," can they see the gathering of people outside Jerusalem preparing for the "triumphal entry" of Jesus, who comes neither on a horse nor in a chariot, symbols of military power and might, but on a donkey, a beast of humility? When they sing, "Hosanna in the highest. Save us now," do they see that the procession comes from Bethany, while the emperor and his military troops and horses and weapons of war always entered the city from the opposite direction?

When the people know these stories and hear them broken open in proclamation, they are formed and reformed as followers of the Prince of Peace. They see through the weapons worn by all who are occupied by the fairytale, "Might Makes Right," the flimsy garments covering those possessed with the fable, "Wealth Will Save." They come to know the God who meets them "outside" the places of power, in their weakness and frailty, when human striving has come to its own dead end. Then, when they sing the Sanctus, they are accepting the invitation to join this unlikely choir of seraphim in the temple praising the God of Hosts and peasants outside Jerusalem praising a rabbi heading toward suffering, abandonment, and death. They join the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, Mary Magdalene and Peter, and all the witnesses of this rabbi's resurrection, the earth and sea and all their creatures, singing an unending hymn of praise to the God who calls and cleanses, clothes and sends us.

Discouraged preachers, take heart. The man once occupied by demons reminds us all what a joy it is to be sent into the city and country to tell all that God has done. What a privilege to tell these stories early and often, not as historical recounting or clever packages for delivering the doctrinal goods, not as fables leading to moralisms or sentimental tales—a dose of chicken soup for the soul—but as the living and life-giving Story into which we have been “tucked,” the very clothing that declares our identity and forms our living.

We all have opportunities to tell the stories: at the opening of council meetings and worship planning sessions, during church school and youth gatherings, at choir rehearsals when guiding musicians toward a deeper understanding of the words they sing, and in premarriage conversations helping a couple shape a faithful way of life together. Tell these stories every way imaginable. Sing them. Sign them. Pray them. Plant them in your own heart. Break the stories open in the presence of the people that they might eat—there are no words more delicious. Pour them out in the presence of the people that they might drink—there is no wisdom more life-giving. Teach lectors to proclaim these words with clarity and confidence. In every way that you are able wrap the people in God’s word and wisdom, until they know themselves always in this Story, until they live in the world as a people of God’s Story.

Through the Preacher, the Spirit Opens Our Eyes to the Garment Bestowed on Us in Baptism

Last year my community, high in the Cascade Mountains of Washington state, celebrated the baptism of Olivia Larson Ekblad, the infant daughter of David and Lottie. Even for a believer in immersion in living, running waters, January is too cold in Railroad Creek Valley to take a baby down to the river. So we did for Olivia what we had done two years earlier for her sister, Nina. We filled the largest stainless steel bowl in the Holden Village kitchen—large enough to toss a salad for two hundred people and deep enough for a baby’s bath—with womb-warm water.

Ordinary water it was, melted from an ancient glacier, but storied-water, too, rich with the wonders of all God has done. We remembered and gave thanks again for God’s work in the stories of creation, Noah and the flood, Israel’s deliverance through the sea, the cleansing of Naaman the leper, Jesus’ own baptism, and his command that we make disciples, baptizing and teaching them. We invited the children to gather around and blow across the water, stirring it with breath.

Then Olivia went into the water. Down went the naked baby: in the name of the Father. Drowned were the demons: in the name of the Son. Bound was she to the Tree of Life: in the name of the Holy Spirit. And she was beautiful, dressed in skin as soft as breath, and as sacred and vulnerable. Coming out of the water, she was wrapped in a soft towel and anointed as a princess, an athlete, a priest. Fragrant oil caressed her baby skin from head to toe until she fairly melted with delight. She was sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

Olivia was clothed in Christ. For the length of her days Christ will cover her nakedness with tender mercy, love, and forgiveness. “You are a child of God,” the congregation told her, promising to remind her, time and again, of God’s gifts of grace. Daily her parents will embody God’s mercy by tending to her nakedness, bathing, dressing, feeding, comforting, and caressing her. They will treat her body with respect, protecting her, as they are able, from harm, and teaching her how to honor her own body and the bodies of others. They know about promise-making. When they were wed, they clothed one another in the garments of promise, the promise of fidelity and forgiveness. All such promises made by Christians to one another are echoes of the promise made to them by God at their own baptism: I will not abandon you. You have put on Christ.

Preaching that opens our eyes, again and again, to this foundational promise shapes us for promise-making. Reminding the assembly of the garment bestowed upon them at baptism forms them as a people able to take the risks of extravagant generosity and self-exposing servant love, of knowing and being known by others. Indeed, as Francis of Assisi reminds us, in baptism we have died the only death that matters. Clothed in Christ’s new life, we are set free to risk every other form of dying for the sake of life, the life of our neighbor and the life of the world.

Through the Preacher, the Spirit Forms Us in Ways Befitting the Clothes We Wear

The nakedness of the man we meet in Luke’s Gospel is not a sign of God’s beautiful handiwork, the sign we glimpsed at Olivia’s baptism. It is not the trusting vulnerability in the presence of a beloved that David and Lottie chose when they robed one another in the garment of their promises. Instead, it is the unprotected nakedness of bondage.

I think of a young woman I will call Alena. Raised in a harmful home where those who had been entrusted with her care abused and neglected her, she knew from the time she was small that the only way to survive was

to leave that house. The minute her anger was stronger than her shame, she left. But once outside, those who came to her promising security and new life led her to the streets, where she sold her nakedness for money, food, and drugs. Like the man occupied by demons, Alena could tell stories of imprisonment, abandonment, and suicide attempts.

One day, stripped of her right mind, Alena sat in the middle of Pacific Avenue, the four-lane highway that runs through my hometown. She had been flying, she later said, but she had landed in the road, naked. When the police came, she could not remember her own name or where she lived. All she could say was, “Don’t forget. Don’t forget. Don’t forget.”

“Don’t forget what?” the police asked as they escorted her from the street. “Don’t forget what?” asked the case worker admitting her to the hospital and the physician doing the psychiatric evaluation. Everyone asked until finally she answered, “Don’t forget. Don’t forget. I’m a child of God. A child of God. Child of God.”

Dressed in nothing but her baptismal identity, having forgotten everything else, she remembered the story, the promise of the One who had become naked for her sake, who was stripped of everything the world could take from him, and crucified, who entered the place of the dead in order to make his home among us while we were yet dying. Even in her nakedness, Alena knew she was clothed in the Naked One. She had put on Christ Jesus.

The next time we see the man in Luke’s Gospel, he is no longer inhabited by demons; his life has been restored, renewed, and returned to him. And he is clothed and in his right mind. *Clothed*. Hear in that single word everything of which he had been stripped: his humanity, his community, his dignity, his sanity, his past, and his future. This man isn’t just clothed; he is dressed in resurrection. He is a new creation. He asks to go with Jesus, but Jesus says, “Go home. Go home and tell your neighbors what God has done. Tell them the demons are vanquished, the powers of evil are drowned, and freedom has come. Tell them the story of God’s power to save.”

Jesus called to Olivia in her nakedness on the day she was baptized. “You are my beloved one. With you I have come to make a home, within you I have breathed my Holy Spirit, around you I have wrapped my mending-mercy, and upon you, like a garment, I have placed my very self, my power, my name, my presence. Go home, Olivia, and with the help and guidance of this community grow into a way of life befitting the grace you wear.

Through ongoing formation we pray she will “grow into” her baptismal garment. She will learn to offer the very hospitality she has received, welcoming the stranger and receiving the outcast. Following the example of her parents and wider community of faith, Olivia will tend the brokenhearted, pray for those who seek to harm her, and love those who will not love her in return. Shaped by the gifts of the sacraments, she will feed the hungry and clothe the naked as she has been fed and clothed, forgive as she has been forgiven, and bless as she has been blessed. In turn, Olivia will shape the lives of her parents and community. And when the demons come knocking at Olivia’s door, promising her something better, telling her she can be more than human or whispering that equally demonic lie, “You are worth nothing,” may the community of faith teach her to declare her identity saying, “I am baptized. I have put on Christ Jesus.”

The man once occupied by demons is sent to witness to his neighbors, who in their nakedness have clothed themselves with the flimsy garment of fear. Afraid of the chaos within the man and the havoc he could wreck among them, they had tried to hold him captive. Now that he is whole and has been re-membered into the community, terror grips them even more tightly, for the power that can free the bound and clothe the naked and call us back from the tomb is even less controllable than a legion of demons. The power of life always is more risky than the power of death. The man is sent to do what every preacher is called to do: call to the people in their nakedness, wrap them in the wisdom and word of God, invite them to be clothed in Christ, and guide them into a way of life befitting those garments.

And Alena, to whom was she speaking as she sat in the middle of Pacific Avenue chanting, “Don’t forget”? She was speaking to the police, the social worker, and the psychiatrist telling them to treat her with dignity. “Don’t forget I am a human being. I might be crazy, but I am created in the image of God.” She was reminding herself who she was and to whom she belonged. “Don’t forget, Alena. You are poor, weak, and alone, but remember you have been tucked into a story larger than this episode. You have been woven into a community, the wounded body of Christ.”

She was crying out to God, “You clothed me in new life. You anointed me your priest. You sealed me with your Spirit and marked me with the cross of Christ forever. Don’t forget me when I am in trouble. Do not turn your face from me. Save now!” And she was testifying to the powers that occupied her and threatened to drive her into the wilds. She spoke the word of life to the powers of death, “I might appear naked to you, but the One who vanquished you has clothed me in the crucified and risen Christ.”

When she awoke, clothed and in her right mind, Alena was held in Christ's suffering and healing body. In our serving and our suffering, in our being formed and reformed by the Word in which we are wrapped, we with Alena, Olivia, David and Lottie and all who are baptized awaken every day as the Beloved in Christ's body.

So writes the poet, Symeon the New Theologian, who lived at the turn of the last millennium (949-1022):

We awaken in Christ's body
as Christ awakens our bodies,
and my poor hand is Christ, He enters
my foot, and is infinitely me....

where all our body, all over,
every most hidden part of it,
is realized in joy as Him,
and He makes us, utterly, real,

and everything that is hurt, everything
that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,
maimed, ugly, irreparably
damaged, is in Him transformed

and recognized as whole, as lovely,
and radiant in His light
we awaken as the Beloved
in every last part of our body.*

**The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*, ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 38-39.