

Year A. Proper 23. RCL

[Isaiah 25:1-9](#) [Psalm 23](#) [Philippians 4:1-9](#) [Matthew 22:1-14](#)

Such gracious and life-giving are found in our scripture readings this morning!

Isaiah exults in God who has “done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure,” God who has been “a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm, and a shade from the heat.” God who “on this mountain” will “make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines” and will “destroy . . . the shroud cast over all peoples,” “swallow up death forever,” and “wipe away the tears from all faces.”

The Psalmist, possibly King David, speaks so tenderly of the Lord his shepherd, who “makes me lie down in the lush green pastures,” “leads me beside still waters,” and “revives my soul,” so that even as death comes near and presses upon me, “I shall fear no evil . . . for you, Lord, are with me,” even now preparing a banquet for me, “anointing my head,” “filling my cup” until it runs over and following me, surrounding me, filling me with “goodness and mercy.” You are drawing me—me, you, all whom we know and love—into the Lord’s house where we can live with God forever.

Paul from a prison cell writes to the church at Philippi, whom he calls his “joy and crown.” He bids them put away conflict has arisen among them and be united—“of the same mind”—so that as fellow labors with him of the Gospel we may all stand firm in the knowledge that God loves us, God who fills us with peace that defies understanding, God who has written each of our names in the Book of Life. This is such good news that from that prison cell and in the face of a probably bleak future in *this* world, joy nonetheless reverberates deep within Paul’s soul and overflows in admonition to us: rejoice, rejoice, rejoice, rejoice, and again I say rejoice.

Finally in the Gospel the king prepares a great feast and when those first invited do not come, he decides to invite anyone and everyone, without regard to race, religion, sex, national origin, age, sexual orientation or disability. Everything is ready. Now come to the feast. Will you come? Will you come and share my joy?

Poignant and powerful.

Generous and grace-filled.

Loving and life-giving.

Wiping away tears. Washing away despair. Protecting from danger. Providing peace. Destroying death. Delivering life.

The most savory food washed down with only the best wine.

What a party! The invitation goes through the highways and byways of the whole world to all sorts and conditions of humanity. Can we imagine the people who have come to the feast from around the globe and across time? Adam to Abraham, Moses to Mary, Bathsheba to Bernadette, Job to Jobs. Now gathered together. Joyous. Celebratory. What a concordant, harmonious symphony of sights and sounds, words and images.

But suddenly, a horrible screech, an unbearably discordant note that assaults our ears and shocks our sensibilities.

The king spots an underdressed guest and angrily demands to know just how he slipped in to the party in the muscle shirt and booty shorts.

As the hapless guest is struck dumb, rendered speechless, the party comes to a screeching halt. Silence.

And we are shaken, shaken from our heavenly dream to the sights and sounds of hell.

“Bind him hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

The wrong clothes. Seriously?

Come on! Can't we just ignore this bizarre aberration and keep the party going? Let's just get the choir just to sing another verse of “just as I am without one plea.”

But, in the king's anger, the organ was destroyed, the choir disbanded, and all is now silent . . . painfully silent . . . except for perpetual sobs and the infernal grinding of teeth.

Do you have to have an Armani tux or at least a Brooks Brothers blazer and a Neiman Marcus tie to cut it at the heavenly gala?

This is reminiscent of the story of the poor but very faithful Baptist deacon who hadn't missed a Sunday or Wednesday service in 20 years, so the pastor got together with a number of the other deacons and surprised Deacon Smith with a new suit. The next Sunday, Deacon Smith was not there. While the concern was immediate, they decided not to intrude on his personal space. But when Deacon Smith missed the next Sunday and the next, the pastor finally decided he had better call Deacon Smith.

"We've missed you the last three Sundays. Is everything all right?"

"Oh yes, yes, I'm doin' great," came the reply.

"Well why haven't you been to church then?" the pastor asked dumbfounded.

"Well, now that I got the right clothes, I decided it was time to become an Episcopalian."

Thankfully. Thankfully the humor in that story doesn't resonate as it once did when The Episcopal Church was known for being a church for the affluent and upwardly mobile. As we become increasingly a church "for all people," we more fully live our motto, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You" (whoever you are).

The zinger in the Gospel story this morning has actually nothing to do with either the cost or the type of apparel we wear. Our intuition that God couldn't care less about what clothes we wear to church is probably a gift of the Spirit, for Jesus clearly tells us that what defiles a person comes not from without but from within, flows out of our heart.

The heart. The heart. The heart is what needs to be clothed with the proper garment. The heart that puts on the whole armor of God, from the helmet of salvation all the way down to the shoes that deliver good news.

This is the king's concern, for he is the one to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid. What garment of covers our heart—that unique spark within each of us that makes us who we are?

Yes, the invitation goes out to the whole world. The feast has been prepared and we are invited. A wedding banquet for Jesus the bridegroom and the church, his bride.

God is not only the king who prepares and invites but also the master tailor who has fashioned for each of us a garment of righteousness, clothing of incomparable holiness, for if anyone is in Christ—he, she, you, I are a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come.

Yes God does love us “just as we are without one plea,” but God loves so much that he doesn’t want us to stay in the soiled and unfulfilling clothes of our fallen humanity but made for us a new dress we couldn’t buy, we can’t make, and we won’t ever earn.

God stands ready to put this beautiful garment on us, a spotless dressed washed in the blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

The invitation has been given. The dress is ready.

But no one—not even God—will force us to come to the party.

And no one—not even God—will force us to wear that dress.

God does not force feed the bread of heaven nor pour that drink which wells up to eternal life down unwilling throats.

God does not force upon us the life he literally dies to give us.

The invitation has come and the dress is ready.

We have to decide if we are willing for the love of God to accept it.

We have to decide for the love of God if we are willing to wear it, to love it, to live it. . . .