

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church on
October 15, 2023.**

STIFF-NECKED

<Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Matthew 22:1-14>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

“The best way not to get cold, is to not get cold.” Our little group was preparing to hike into the Colorado backcountry for a week. We would be carrying packs that weighed-in at 50 pounds or so, and which would contain all our food, our shelter, our sleeping bags, and our clothing. And anything which we didn’t have, wasn’t going to be available to us. Preparation was very much on our minds, and checklists were everywhere. At that moment, however, our guide was counseling us on our clothing. “The best way not to get cold, is to not get cold.” On the surface it seemed like a given; of course that would be easiest, but we were curious what to do if we *did* get cold there in the mountains. His response, though it took us hearing it a couple times to comprehend it, was to prepare ourselves and to not get cold in the first place; it’s easier to stay warm than it is to warm up. And for the next week, we would need to be very mindful of not only our current state of dress, but how we would need to dress as conditions changed.

It seems like such a silly thing, but I would say a decent case could be made for the reality that being under-dressed or under-prepared is one of the greatest general anxieties of our society. Think of all the marketing that goes into convincing us we need something - which, of course, that company conveniently sells - in order to be prepared for life’s eventualities. Or perhaps one of the most common general anxiety dreams has to do with being back in school and sitting for a test that you didn’t study for, or called to the blackboard in your underwear.

And our parable this morning from Jesus certainly doesn’t help that general anxiety.

The parable is straight-forward: A king gives a wedding banquet for his son, and when the invited guests do not show up, the king invites everyone off the streets. It’s a wonderful example of grace, welcome, hospitality, and inclusion. But one person shows up underdressed, and the king - irate to see this - has the unfortunate back-up guest thrown out - not just back onto the streets, but into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. As a counter to the invitation, this is a fearful example of not living up to expectations. Of being under-prepared.

“The best way not to get cold, is to not get cold.”

Even understanding that this is a parable, a fictionalized and overly hyperbolic story meant to illustrate a point, I can almost feel my anxiety rising. Am I prepared enough? Is

there more that I can do? Is there more that I should be doing? What about the things that no one told me about, how do I do them?

In a culture that seems to be more and more gripped by anxiety, this situation could be more than enough to tip it over the edge. The question, then, of what we do with it becomes of paramount importance.

Yes, it is still true that we could remember the initial targeted audience of this parable. We are still gathered with Jesus in the temple, who is speaking to the chief priests and elders and answering them, instructing them in response to their question regarding his authority. Jesus continues to teach them regarding the fullest nature of the Kingdom of God and the ministry he is about. But we would do ourselves a disservice if we only left our approach to this parable at that audience, for it still has something to offer us today, as well. And even if an initial response leans toward increased anxiety, I do not believe that is the intended outcome. And thankfully, I believe we also have a key to understanding this better as we continue our journey with the People of Israel in the wilderness, post deliverance from Egypt.

They, too, are filled with anxiety. Even though they have witnessed miracle upon miracle, each one leading to life and living as the people of God, they are still recovering, and with Moses - the one whom they've been learning to listen to - with Moses absent for an extended period of time, they are anxious to a heightened degree. Not sure what to do with themselves, not sure of what to make of an absent Moses and a quiet God, they turn to Aaron and do the most human thing that could be expected in such a situation: they demand an idol to be the representation of their trust. In their anxiety, they make for themselves a thing on which to cast their gaze and seek reassurance. And Aaron listens, in spite of the commandments of life that had previously come to them.

Herein lies the key: The people of God, overwhelmed by anxiety, seek to make due for themselves to ease their anxiety and reassure themselves. They look to themselves and their own designs. They think they know better, and in so thinking, they miss the mark. And this is truly, I believe, what earns them the quality in God's eyes of being stiff-necked and stubborn. They place their own desires and understandings above the understanding that has been given to them by God.

Naturally, God can see down the mountain to what is going on and, understandably, is less than pleased. Any experienced parent can hear the frustration in God's voice, declaring to Moses, "*YOUR* people, whom *YOU* brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely...". It's not enough that the people have made an idol, breaking the First Commandment; more than that, they have placed their trust in themselves and and not lived into the new relationship to which they have been called. They have been stiff-necked and slow to live into who, and whose, they are now called to be.

The guest invited to the wedding feast, presumably, should have known better. Even if it was a last-minute invitation off the street, regardless even that it was for the king's son,

the inappropriately dressed guest should perhaps have known better. We can speculate all day long, but the dynamic presented to us is that a person invited to such a celebratory feast of life thought that he knew better, and so did not dress for the occasion. Stiff-necked. Stubborn. Leaning only on one's own understanding.

I'm sure that doesn't sound familiar to any of us, this morning.

This, truly, is the question before us: When have we thought that we knew better, presumed that we knew better, and paid less attention to living out what we are called to do?

The question, indeed, as a condemning one. It was, ultimately, what condemned the chief priests and elders; it has, at times in my own life and ministry, rung a little too close to heart; and it can be hard to live with. But it is also the question that invites us, calls and beckons us, to go further, to live deeper into faith, to return to a right understanding of life before God. By relinquishing our own sense of trust in ourselves, we live faithfully into trusting God and living as a people of the Kingdom of God.

The invitation is still, daily, before each of us. When we accept the invitation, we are to do so with an obedience and willingness to "dress for the occasion;" we cannot accept and then not live up to the standards of the calling, and that may mean that we set aside our own preferences, expectations, or understandings in order to live into that to which we are called. The Greek word Jesus uses, over six times in the verses of this parable, represent an invitation to a life-changing calling, a calling with purpose. Furthermore, it is a standing invite; it never ceases. And our response to this invitation is ever one in process.

As Biblical scholar Chelsey Harmon writes, "God's calling to a new life in Christ does not end with the invitation to faith. It runs deep and wide, transforming our living, breathing, everyday walking around existence. Those who accept the invitation will find that along the way to the wedding banquet of heaven, they will put on the ways of our faithful Savior."

The best way to keep from getting cold is to not get cold. The best way to live into God's calling is to both accept the invitation and "dress" for the occasion, leaning not on our own understandings, but on those that we have been offered in faith.

Moses ultimately reminds God that the people are not Moses' people, they are God's people. And God has covenanted to lead them. To nurture them. And to provide for them. God lives into this. And so we are enabled to live into Christ, to trust in the One who leads us and guides us forward. And in such living, we find that we are more and more appropriately dressed for the celebration. Let us live into this understanding, and let us live in faith. Amen.