

WHAT TO WEAR FOR THAT SPECIAL OCCASION

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Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday

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Mark 9:2-9

In his best selling book, *The Year of Living Biblically*, A. J. Jacobs takes a humorous, at times satiric look, at the demands of Scripture when taken literally. At the beginning of his year long journey, he inspects his entire wardrobe to determine if it meets the standards of Deuteronomy 22:11 – that often over-looked ancient ritual law against wearing clothes made of wool and linen woven together. Jacobs hires a specialist to examine his clothes and let him know which ones he can continue to wear. The investigator declares that his only suit is off limits and in its place he busies himself each morning by attaching tassels to the corners of his garments in accordance with Numbers 15:38. With advice like this, it is little wonder that we would never expect to find fashion advice in the Bible. However, today's Gospel lesson provides a surprising tip on where to find that dazzling outfit.

Embedded in this story of Jesus' visit to a mountaintop with some of his disciples is a set of snapshots from an earlier story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. It is a kind of cinematic flashback to the beginning of Mark's Gospel. Mark's Gospel starts with Jesus' baptism – there is no nativity scene or Christmas Eve story. For Mark, Jesus' birth begins here in the Jordan River. Out of this seminal experience, the teaching, healing, and feeding ministry begins.

The scene of Jesus' baptism opens with John the Baptist out in the wilderness. John is famous for his fashion faux pas – that tacky (and out of date) attire of camel's hair and a leather belt. This retro outfit is a mistaken tribute to his hero the prophet Elijah – the one whom we heard about taking the chariot ride in our first reading this morning. John the Baptist is a hard working preacher pressing for change (a kind of ancient version of Bruce Springsteen). He is a populist who is calling for renewal way out in the wilderness, far away from the religious and political center of power in Jerusalem. It is part religious revival and part circus spectacle and evidently everyone wants to participate. Jesus joins with the crowd and is baptized in the Jordan River – the same river where Elijah and Elisha met to pass the prophetic mantle. And the same Jordan River that Moses looked out across in order to see the promised land. This river that the children of Israel would cross through on their journey of discipleship.

While the Old Testament stories of the Jordan River picture the water opening up, the story of Jesus' baptism is one of the water closing over him while the sky appears to have ripped open and the Spirit descends. Here in the waters of baptism, Jesus receives a divine blessing. Here, in the waters of baptism, Jesus' ministry begins. After his baptism, Jesus' heads out on the road, preaching the news of God's reign. As conflict begins to escalate with the religious leaders in Jerusalem, Jesus goes off on a spiritual retreat with James and Peter and John. In today's reading, they escape the crowds and head high up the mountain to regroup. It is there on the mountain, where Mark pictures a mystical scene of transfiguration.

Here, on the mountain top, we get a fashion show that is simply divine. Jesus appears before the disciples in a dazzling white outfit. It would be easy to overlook the meaning

of Jesus' choice of attire – dismiss it as the trick of some kind of laser show on a 1st century runway, but Mark will not let us rush past this fashion statement. In case we miss the point of the outfit, Mark provides us other clues. Elijah and Moses show up as the judges of this fashion show. A cloud overshadows the entire scene – in the Bible always a sign of God's presence – and from the cloud comes the same voice from Jesus' baptism with a strikingly similar message. This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!

In Mark's Gospel, this transfiguration tale occurs in the exact middle of the gospel. We have seen the journey from baptism to the mountain. From today's transfiguration experience, the journey moves back down the mountain top to the cross in Jerusalem. Throughout this long journey, Jesus' baptismal outfit remains constant.

There will be challenging days ahead. Crowds and conflicts and a confrontation with the religious and political authorities lay ahead. In the midst of all this, it is this dazzling white cloth – this sign of baptismal identity as a child of God that is wrapped around Jesus as swaddling clothes that will surround him through the difficult days ahead.

Lately, I have been reading quite a bit about baptism in the good old days. By good old days, I mean way back 1700 or 1800 years ago when Christianity was still a young religion. Back then, if you showed an interest in Christianity, then you underwent a kind of preliminary examination – called a scrutiny. The test consisted of this one question: were you willing to help out those who were in need? If you were, then you went through a time of preparation for baptism (in some places it lasted for a couple of years). During this time, the primary purpose was to work on caring for your neighbors – not just the people around you whom you liked, but the widows, orphans, imprisoned, and strangers from different countries. These folks who otherwise were neglected were the focus of attention. In fact, Christians became known as the people who took food and clothes to those who were otherwise usually ignored. The test for readiness for baptism was to spend your time and energy caring for the forgotten. When you made enough progress on this journey, then you were brought before the congregation and stood up in front of everyone and one of the regulars in the congregation stood beside you and testified on your behalf. "I have been watching Ethel or . . . and I have noticed how she spends time caring for the sick and poor and I see signs of growth in her life." Once you made it that far, then there was a kind of crash course during Lent to prepare you for the big event of your baptism at Easter. You learned the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. Then, on the eve of Easter at the Vigil service, those who were going to be baptized gathered and were taken to the water and there they were baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When they came up out of the pool of water, they were wrapped in new white clothes – their baptismal gowns which they wore each day. Afterwards, everyone gathered around a table to share a meal, a celebration, a feast of bread and wine and sometimes of milk and honey. This bread and this cup, that we still share together today, became the weekly occasion for baptized Christians to come together, to renew our baptismal vows, to encourage one another, and to continue to go out to feed and clothe our neighbors.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I do not know all the challenges that you face here in Shepherdstown. Your work here in this church surely comes with its own sets of opportunities and demands. Surely, your neighborhood includes those who are poor, forgotten, and neglected. Reaching out is rewarding, and sometimes difficult work. It can be easy to get so caught up in significant moments that we share inside these walls that we forget our primary mission to live as disciples of Jesus Christ who respond to the needs of those around us. Today's Gospel reading, points us clearly back in this

direction. On the mountaintop with Jesus, Peter becomes so caught up in the moment that he suggests that they should stay. But, then the divine cloud came over Jesus and the disciples and they remembered their baptisms and headed down the mountain to continue their ministry.

Friends, our baptismal clothes prepare us for the work that God is calling us to do. Our common experiences at this font and around this table prepare us and strengthen us for the days ahead. Today, may we not only celebrate Jesus' transfiguration long ago, but may the Spirit transfigure us so that the words of the prayer that we share at table today will shape our lives:

Teach us to befriend the lost,
To serve the poor,
To reconcile our enemies,
And to love our neighbors.

As we go out from this place, I'll keep my eyes open for the dazzling white gowns that each of you is wearing. To God be the glory. Amen.