

THE OLD MEETING HOUSE
East Montpelier Center, Vermont

“Skin”

Exodus 20:1-20, Philippians 3:4b-14

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The routine is almost always the same. Her shirt is the first to go. Habit though it is, the motion contorts her: the left arm stretches forward, waiting for the right arm to join, to climb into the long blue sleeve, to widen the opening so that both arms might slip out of the soft, protective covering. The process is repeated to the right, and her head slumps forward to allow the shirt to pass. The blue fabric, sliding onto to the cold, hard, wood floor, moves more gracefully than she does.

She stares in the mirror for just a moment too long. What stranger is this looking back at her – with its crow’s feet and wrinkles? Whose body is this, so marked by life?

She has heard the words, knows that she is meant to be made in the image of God, but each morning she covers it up. She paints youth in firm brushstrokes on her cheeks, covers her anxieties with accessories, her failures and fears with fashion. But each night, this is her ritual, her daily prayer, to take them off again. Her palms inventory the day, moving over the skin, checking for aches, inspecting the soreness.

She is alone, but she instinctively covers the soft handles of flesh that have developed around her middle, trying to hide them, even from her reflection. They are not a part of her, and neither is the ache in her knee that tells her the broken bones of yesterday are protesting the damp chill of today.

She lingers on the long, raised, pink scar that covers her abdomen. It is as foreign to her as the cancer they removed, and just as unwelcome.

It is betraying her, this body, pouring out into the room her vulnerability. And she reaches quickly for her nightgown to cover it up again. But she is too late. She has peeled off the layers of her day, the layers of her life, and she has seen herself – reflected honestly. In this moment, she is naked.

“Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. [...] For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, [...] I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.”

Paul was a pretty good guy before his conversion. He followed the law – which means he honored his parents, didn't lie or cheat or steal, and trained himself not to look at the pretty women walking by – that's no small feat. But following the law had become a to-do list for him, a set of requirements to be checked off. And sitting high up in his position of relative power, he understood that he had made a resume of his own righteousness, an idol of his way of life. An idol of himself, really.

Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. [...]

And so, to get to the heart of the matter, Paul strips them away.

All those gains, One by one, he discards them.

Wealth. [discard]

Zeal. [discard]

Lineage [discard]

All of those things that he had used to value himself slip gracefully to the cold, wood floor. And the pile is getting bigger and bigger.

All those things he thought had been the right things – the things by which he understood his own value for the world.

His desire for perfection.

Self-righteousness.

Stability.

As the pile grows bigger, as he becomes more and more vulnerable, he lingers here, before he allows himself to slip out of his need to be well-respected in the world.

How difficult it must be to remove them. Like a Band-Aid peeled away, I am sure his understanding of himself as a popular, successful man must have ached, pulled at him as it was removed.

One by one until he stood there, vulnerable, naked before the world, with only his desire to know God – really KNOW God, and be known BY God, to clothe himself.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, [...] I want to know Christ by becoming like him.

But then again, how freeing it must have felt for Paul, when he was done stripping away the weight of the world, and hearing as if for the first time that *I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out of slavery, who even now is bringing you out of slavery.*

Because isn't that what it feels like? To get rid of things? Being led out of slavery?

I am not good enough at my job. (discard)

I am not a good enough parent. (discard)

I am not a good enough child, or sibling, or husband or wife. (discard)

My house isn't large, or finished, or clean. (discard)

Do not be afraid, I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out of slavery, who even now is bringing you out of slavery.

Doesn't it feel a bit like being led out of slavery to take it all off?

Love what I have given you, the Lord says, but keep for yourself something holy. Remember the Sabbath day, Remember ME - my name, savor it, and it only, that your days might be LONG in the land I have created for you.

Doesn't it feel a bit like the Exodus to let go of the busy-ness? The rush?

To let go of getting that last detail of the project done. That last email sent.

Let go of that deep, aching fear that *this* is not enough, **you** are not enough.

Slip out of the habit of doing. And maybe, just maybe, into the habit of being.

I am the Lord your God, not you. Not your work. Not money.

"Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. [...] For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, [...] I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death."

Scripture tells us that Jesus was a threat.

When he was condemned, they took him to the hill where he was to die. And then they stripped him. We don't know what it looked like. Whether it was violent. If he stood there, passively, while it happened, the soldiers tugging at his clothing. Or if they took off his outer robe one arm after another gently, more like a dinner guest. If he looked them in the eye as they undid the knot of his belt, and his tunic spread out loosely around him. We don't know if he clutched at the fabric of his tunic, as it was pulled from him, if he tried to hold onto it. Or if he slipped out of it gracefully, one arm first, the left arm reaching into the sleeve of the right, and then the right arm into the left. Did he

pull it up over his own head, smelling for the last time the fabric of his life – his sweat, tinged with the odor of his last supper? The bread and the wine.

We don't know if he tried to cover himself – hands over his shoulders, his stomach. Or if he stood there, proudly, his chin tilted in defiance, or pity, or, more likely, mercy.

But we do know this: what they did to him, well, it was the worst possible death for a Jew. Not because the flesh is weak, or sinful, but because the body is holy. The body is made in the image of God, and it should be respected. And so he hung there, his arms outstretched. The word of God made flesh, made vulnerable, open to the wounds of the world. Naked.

I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out of slavery, who even now is bringing you out of slavery.

The greatest paradox of the Christian faith is this: if we are doing it right, to the world it looks as if following our God makes us weak. Poor. Maybe even crazy. But the gospel literally means GOOD NEWS. And I understand if we are afraid of it, this gospel is just as radical, just as revolutionary, just as challenging as it was 2000, 4000 years ago. Just as challenging to you and me as it was to Moses, and Jesus and Paul.

Paul may have slipped off wealth, and respect, and status – I am sure his peers would have said he slipped off sanity – but as he did so, don't you think he put on something else – slipped on the true, honest, flesh of the word? Passed down from generation to generation, don't you think these words of covenant became for him a second skin?

I am before *anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth*. Jesus spread out his arms and took in the pain of the world precisely to show us that God is before *anything* and everything. Even suffering. Even death.

If you allow these words to be written on your heart, and not on stone – or paper in a dusty, unused Bible, you just might find out what Paul discovered while sitting in jail, what Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nelson Mandela and Oscar Romero, discovered when persecuted: there is no jail that can hold you – physical or emotional. There is no thing that can trap you – no job, no person, no addiction, no disease. No amount of money or lack thereof.

What is YOUR jail? What is YOUR God?

Each morning we clothe ourselves. Not just with garments, but with our schedules, our meetings, our partners, our plans. We wrap ourselves in the diplomas on the wall, in the labels on the car and on the clothes. We are armed with overly high expectations of ourselves and others, defense mechanisms and coffee mugs.

But at night, when we take it all off, when we dare to look ourselves in the mirror, when we dare to confront the way we physically and emotionally bear the marks of time, when we face ourselves as we really are – that is the moment when we become like Christ. The word of God made flesh, made vulnerable, open to the wounds, yes, but also to the true wonders of the world.

So this week, try clothing yourself in something else. Naked before your God, vulnerable to the world, clothe yourself in love and you will be amazed at what is possible. Clothe yourself in rest, so that you might see the beauty of the world God has created around you.

Make these words your second skin: *Do not be afraid, for I am the Lord your God, and even now I am leading you out of slavery. You have no other gods before me, for I am before anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.*

Thanks be to God.