“Dressed for Action and Lamps Lit

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There is a lot that we learn about the nature of God’s character in this morning’s scripture lessons, and there is a lot that we learn about how we are to be in response; about how we are to *be* and what we are to *do*. Both Isaiah and Luke ground their teachings in the present, while also reminding those who would listen and see, that God asks of us today what will usher in God’s reign eternally, as well. We are reminded that what we do *and* what we *do not do* has a very real effect on what heaven looks like for us and for others, *now* and *eternally.*

I’d like to share a clarifying passage from Bobby Morris, who is a pastor and also serves as adjunct faculty of Hebrew Bible at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary of Lenoir Rhyne University. “Isaiah teaches us something critical about worship. Worship is not just ritual. It is not going through motions for the sake of going through motions. Furthermore, worship is not to be viewed or experienced as exclusively, or even predominantly, transactional. This is to say, worship is not something we do to appease an ill-tempered, vengeful God.10 Rather than being transactional, worship is to be transformative. It should influence who we are, what we do, and how we do it. Thus, after calling out the untransformative worship of the people, Isaiah lays out what should be the outgrowth of worship—not rebellion against God and iniquity and estrangement as described in verses 2–4, but instead, ceasing to do evil, learning to do good, seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow (verses 16–17).”

So often, the God we know through the prophets is believed to be somehow ever vengeful. Rather, God reminds us of God’s mercy and also of our need to be merciful. I hope you can hear in this, we also learn how we are to respond to the presence of such a God in our lives. Our Gospel lesson teaches us a lot about God as we know God through Jesus, our Lord. There is in our lessons a kind of a subversion of things. I think in my own youthful, perhaps the first time I identified myself outwardly as Christian, I loved that Jesus was subversive . . . I loved the fact that the God we know looks at the world and sometimes wants to upend what is the norm. There is a subversion regarding the role of “master” in the lesson from Luke today. If we think of our own abhorrent history of slaves and masters, we know the master to be dominating, to usher in inequity, pain and suffering. Here, the master is someone new! Jesus, as master, calls us to follow suit and be servant to the people. Even the notion of being vigilant has a different connotation these days, and I wonder what is the first word that comes to your mind if you hear the word vigilant these days. “ICE!” “Vigilante.” The notion of vigilance in this passage is meant to remind us of our need to be prepared, to be prepared with an understanding of the one who tells us not to fear, but also to be ready.

I appreciate Mary’s saying “ICE,” and that could steer me in an entirely different direction about what it means to be ready for those who feel a different kind of vigilance. We also are preparing ourselves to be vigilant.

Part of the way that we make ourselves ready is to gather in worship: we remember God, who made us, loves us, and who wants for us and for all of humanity abundant life, now and always. We gather in worship to remind ourselves that to love God is to love our neighbor as ourselves. Luke reminds us that to do so and to be ready to meet Jesus, at any time, we are to make ourselves ready at all times. Making ourselves ready, says Luke, takes constant vigilance in the way of the one who is meant to keep the lights on, when to do so means maintaining the only light in the darkness. I stepped out two nights ago when my girls’ dad sent a mutual text that we should all run out and see the moon. So, I did run outside—and heard loud noises in the utter dark I had tried to prepare. I ran inside, not knowing if it were bear or, probably, deer chuffing. I was reminded of just how dark darkness can be, and how absolutely necessary at this time would be maintaining the lamp—for the bridegroom to return, for a guest to arrive; for the hordes of people to come celebrate with us. It is not easy work, and the lamp cannot run dry—not for us as we wait to see Jesus, and not for all those who are waiting for a glimpse, waiting for just a morsel of the light. So, I wonder if we have prepared the feast? How have we lightened the path?

I saw a lot of feasting and a lot of lighting yesterday. Sure, the Blueberry Festival is a fundraiser for us, but we also offered—and offer every year—a glimpse of what joy looks like, of what united, joyful community looks like. As we broke down the tents late in the afternoon, Sarah said that it was like the movement of synchronized swimmers, and we even held our hands up in somewhat graceful fashion as the last tent was walked to center. That was the kind of community I described to the very many people who remarked to me, as your pastor, about what a delightful congregation this seems to be. “It *is*,” I replied, and a faithful one. What we do for each other here, and even now, and what we do for those who are most in need is the essence of our worship, the essence of our response to God. Isaiah has harsh words for those who would worship only symbolically and not in their actions in caring for others. In speaking with people, and in particular with one gentleman yesterday about our denomination, the United Church of Christ, which seeks to be united and uniting, and in speaking about our Congregational polity, in which we recognize covenant among all of us, equally, with God who loves and guides us, I was delighted to say that our worship prepares us; our worship makes us ready to serve. Our church in this world is the Body of Christ who asks us to live, not as those who seek only to grow their own abundance and comfort but as those who live to serve the most vulnerable, seeing Jesus in them. I was struck again in reading our passage from Isaiah and hearing in our psalm the words about Zion. I know that in this treacherous, tenuous time in the land we call Zion, it makes folks uncomfortable to think about taking *a* side. And I have to say that I think sometimes I avoid—I know, because it is happening even now—I cannot speak about Gaza without choking up. I cannot speak of the children and other people who are dying of hunger without choking up. So, when I say that we prepare ourselves to serve those in need, and when we gather for worship, Isaiah reminds us that it is not to be simply symbolic worship, but that what God knows as our truest worship is to meet the needs of the widow, the orphan--and we read in Leviticus and Deuteronomy as well the immigrant among us. I truly believe that we have to hear this as a call for our response in faith; to our worship to the one God who unites us—all. May it be so.