

# ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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## DEEP STORIES

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Text of a Sermon preached on the 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

October 11, 2020

ISAIAH 25:1-9 | PSALM 23

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9 | MATTHEW 22:1-14

When someone asks, “How are you?” We answer, “Fine, thank you.” Occasionally we go deeper and try to connect our feelings with what is going on in our lives. It can be hard to do. We often don’t know how we feel or why we feel the way we feel. This is our “deep story.” Deep stories are the narratives that govern our lives, that explains us to ourselves and then us to the world.

Our deep stories connect next to what we might call foundational stories, just on the next layer up toward the surface. The promise of the American Dream is one of these stories. It may be real or it may be a myth, but the point is, we relate to that story through our emotional attachment to it, to the various ways it has felt true or false to our experience.

In 2016, many white working class Americans articulated an experience of how the American Dream was changing, disappearing. That year, one researcher after having spent five years in southeast Louisiana, wrote a book called “Strangers in Their Own Land.” In it she distilled a “deep story,” She found, when she shared it, that people might add or subtract from it, but would say “that is exactly how I feel.”

Here is a version. There is a line you get into when you want to take part in the American Dream. While you wait, you work hard, you get married and have a family, you go to church, pay your taxes, and help your neighbors. Eventually you get to the head of the line and you get invited to the party – the American Dream.

But lately, the line has stopped moving. People weren’t getting ahead. Neighbors were falling out of line. No good jobs, opioid addiction, no real help from the government. And more than that, it seemed like other people who had come along later were getting ahead of them in line, sometimes cutting in line. The message was coming through that they didn’t matter. So they changed parties and voted for someone who said he saw this and would change it.

What a difference four years makes. In 2020, especially after the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd and the chaos of these days running up to our elections, the line, if we can find it, just looks different. Many of us are learning updated stories of racial or economic or representative disparities. We are not just dealing with new information, but with new feelings. We are trying to connect these stories coming at us fast and furious to our deep story.

It is like trying on clothes. We are not only looking in the mirror to see if they fit, but how we feel about them, how they make us feel. And when we walk out the door, we can only hope that we will have the clothes on we need for the upcoming occasions. Remember this, next time someone asks: “how are you?!”

When we open our heart to God's word, we are looking to connect it to our deep story. Jesus warns us that we need to know how we feel that God is coming to judge the living and the dead. God has sent the prophets to condemn injustice, but also to help us discover our longing for that promised feast on the mountain, the wedding banquet that we will suddenly find ourselves invited to.

Jesus rode into town the last week of his life full of prophetic fire. He overthrew the money changers in the temple. He cursed a fig tree that was minding its own business for not bearing fruit. He told several plain parables about how the elites had corrupted the country and corrupted themselves. He predicted they would be overthrown. He predicted the precious temple would be utterly destroyed. He concluded that God was going to act, that God was going to have to act, in order for the story to have another chapter, an ending true to the ancient promises.

It is one thing to take down the elites. Now he turns his attention to us. He walks through the crowd, looks us up and down, and invites us to a feast. But wait! When you left the house this morning, what clothes did you have on? A wedding garment?! What exactly is the King looking for?

I will save you time and combine all the wonderful interpretations that have come down to us. The wedding garment is the fruit of the good works that flow from our confidence in our baptism. It is that trust in God that inspires us to come ready in faith, hope, and love, to worship God and serve one another.

Think about being invited by someone you don't know well to a party. Think about how important it is to show up dressed like everyone else. We humans are naked creatures. Not only do clothes make the man, clothes often tell us what is going on in the deepest part of ourselves.

Our gospel lesson this morning tricks us as we stand in front of the mirror. We think we know how it is going to go. We think we know where we fit in it. God is going to judge others for their unfaithfulness, their deafness to the prophets call for justice. God is going to invite us to the wedding banquet of grace. But suddenly the king walks in, and looks us up and down. Friend, what are you doing in here without the proper clothes?! Out you go!

How should we manage these shifting emotions, these violent realities? Thankfully, our other lessons this morning give us a clue. The latest research on our brain and behavior tells us that we can change how we feel about anything by doing the opposite. If you smile, you will feel more happy. If you get up and take a walk, you feel the world differently. If you focus your breath and your thoughts on stillness, you will discover a deeper story.

We are invited this morning to remember Paul in jail and a church in Philippi in division and disagreement. What does Paul do. He simply says this:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This is what we can remember the next time we are trying to connect to our deep story, our beliefs about who we are and how God is looking after us in the world. The next time we look in the mirror and see how we are dressed for the day ahead, try on these words for size:

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

These are words that will clothe us in grace. These are words that have power to change our deep stories toward the story of the King who invites us to the great feast, the wedding banquet on the Holy Mountain of God.