

The Rev. Joel C. Daniels, PhD
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 3, 2019

Lectionary Year C:
Jeremiah 1:4-10
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30
Psalm 71:1-6

The men who couldn't be king

Once upon a time, in a land far away, there was a king. He was rich, royally rich; proud; vain; cruel to those he saw as disloyal; demanding of attention; demanding of flattery; demanding of subservience; and rather buffoonish. He was insecure, anxious about his position. He was royalty, all right; but he was also a royal pain, and an ignorant royal pain at that.

But he was rich, royally rich, so he was able to surround himself with a band of sniveling courtiers who did his every bidding in order to maintain his royal favor, all the while mocking him behind his back.

He wanted the most beautiful clothes, to be dressed in the finest finery, soft and luxurious, ostentatiously luxurious, all of which he imagined, wrongly, reinforced his position as a kingly king. Each week his tailor would come to him with fabrics from near and far, all to feed his greedy appetite for vanity.

But it was never enough, all the things the tailor brought, because it never is enough, and so the wily tailor came up with a plan. Cognizant of the way his patron contained both vanity and idiocy in equal measure, the tailor came to him with what he said was the most rare and coveted fabric known to man. This fabric was the desire of every other royal figure in the world; it was impossible to obtain; it was more beautiful than any he had ever seen. And the tailor had it, there in his case. It would cost him a lot, but the king was rich, royally rich, and in exchange for some of those riches, this fabric could be his.

Hearing all of this, the king was delirious, almost out of his mind, with desire. He turned over the money as fast as he could possibly move and reached for the case with trembling hands. He fumbled with the lock while the tailor smiled secretly. The case opened. And the king saw nothing.

The king looked questioningly at the tailor, but the wily tailor, prepared for this, played his role to a T: he gushed at what was in truth an empty case, acting as if he was taking the fabric out, smoothing it, lavishing praise on it. Could the king see how luxurious it was? he asked. Could he see how the entire world would come to respect him and his position when they saw him bedecked in such finery? All the attendants nodded; oh yes, it would be impressive, it would be intimidating, it would be effective.

Though he saw nothing himself, the king knew that he had to have whatever it was they were talking about; he just had to have it, and so the tailor rushed off, pockets heavy with gold, to produce these phantom clothes.

A royal procession was planned for the next day. The army was mustered to support this impressive display of power, this reinforcement of strength. Rumors spread about the garments throughout the country, about their beauty, about the power they reflected.

The result was that, by the next morning, everyone was there. The whole world was there. They lined the streets, they filled the plazas, they covered the hilltops; they even scaled the trees for a better look.

And among them, in the crowd, was a boy. A child about our children's ages, without guile, only an unfortunate tendency to tell the truth.

They waited until late in the morning, as the tailor finished his "work." The king still saw nothing—there was nothing to see—but the oo-ing and the ahh-ing had their effect, and he mimed putting on these very rare clothes—because they were very rare, there was no denying that—and hurried people into position for the parade.

Finally, with a flourish of trumpet fanfare, the king began his impressive procession, out among the hoi polloi, surrounded by courtiers, soldiers, high-ranking officers and low-ranking servants. In the middle of all the pomp and circumstance was the unfortunate king, wearing nothing, covered in nothing, simultaneously arrogant and anxious. No fabric; no royal robes; no luxurious garments. Just the man himself, uncovered and exposed.

The boy stares. He can't believe it. His mouth opens, then closes. He glances around, but he doesn't speak. But deep in his heart, he hears a voice, and the voice says, "I have appointed you a prophet to the nations." The boy answers, "I am only a boy." The voice in his heart replies, "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you. ... I have put my words in your mouth."

"The emperor has no clothes," the boy says, quietly. No one responds. "Look!" he implores those around him. The boy lives in the realm of truth, not of fantasy, and it is the truth that there is nothing there, nothing but the man himself. "Look, the emperor has no clothes; he is wearing no clothes!"

No one laughed. The procession, which had been proceeding noisily with feigned festivity, jerks to a stop; all fall silent; and a ripple of fear passes through the king, but he suppresses it, as he has so many times before. He glares. He mutters to the captain of guard escorting him. Looking at the boy, he asks, "Is not this Joseph's son?" Isn't he just Joseph's son? The captain nods curtly. What right does he have? What threat is he posing? Who does he think he is? There is murmuring and discontent. The boy is ruining it for everyone.

The king's eyes narrow, because to question the truth of the king is to question the authority of the king, which is to question the order of the kingdom.

So the king points at the boy. "Guilty," he says. "Guilty."

And maybe the clothes aren't real, and maybe he's a royal pain, and maybe he's just a buffoonish, naked man, but the king is still the king, no matter what else is going

on, and now the king has spoken, with all the authority that he is vested with, including the authority to say that a lie is the truth. And it may as well be, because a phalanx of soldiers moves toward the boy, who is scared, because who wouldn't be. The boy looks around for help, but there is none forthcoming.

As they come through the crowd to take him away, he hears the voice again: "If you have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge ... but do not have love, you are nothing."

And so, as the crowd watches the boy be taken away, he calls out to them, "I forgive you. I forgive you." To the crowds. To his friends. To the soldiers. Even, yes, to the king. And it seemed to all the people, gathered there, lining the streets, filling the plazas, that they could hear his quiet voice, no matter how far away they were, somehow miraculously penetrating their hearts. He forgives you.

The procession was scuttled after that, but soon enough things in the kingdom went back to their usual strange ways—the royalty being royal pains and everyone else going about their business—and, there for a while, people wondered if they'd ever see that boy again.

Then reports started filtering in, first from the city, then from the countryside... how someone had met him—Joseph's son, Mary's boy—met him by the roadside, providing a gentle word during a harsh time; another felt him present while sitting by the bedside of a sick relative; another heard those words of forgiveness all over again in a dark hour when they needed to be heard most. First only one or two had these experiences, then more and more. He had gone from someone who needed saving, to someone who was saving others—there was no other way to put it. He became someone they talked about, and then, someone they talked to. Some had their lives changed from knowing him. The boy who was called to speak the truth, in love.

That king's nonsense continued on, unabated; then at some point it was replaced, but just by another king's nonsense, but that was all right. Because things had changed for the people. For a while there, the countrymen had thought that they had to go along with the lies and mischief of their king, and for a while there they had thought that the power of the sword would always have the last word, and that last word would be a lie. But that wasn't right, after all. Joseph's son, they came to realize, was the real king, even if his kingdom was not of this world. His was a kingdom of peace; it was a kingdom of love.

It was hard to see, sometimes, that his kingdom was there. It was hard, sometimes, to believe it. But Joseph's son, Mary's boy, had conquered the world. And he conquers it still.