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The spoiled loincloth. Anticipation of future vindication in the present.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Jeremiah 13 Thus says the LORD to me, Go and buy a linen loincloth and put it around your waist, and do not dip it in water. So I bought a loincloth according to the word of the LORD, and put it around my waist. And the word of the LORD came to me a second time, Take the loincloth that you have bought, which is around your waist, and arise, go to the Euphrates, and hide it there in a cleft of the rock.

So I went and hid it by the Euphrates, as the Lord commanded me. And after many days the Lord said to me, Arise, go to the Euphrates, and take from there the loincloth that I commanded you to hide there. Then I went to the Euphrates and dug, and I took the loincloth from the place where I had hidden it.

And behold, the loincloth was spoiled. It was good for nothing. Then the word of the Lord came to me, Thus says the Lord, even so will I spoil the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem.

This evil people who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own heart and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing. For as the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, declares the Lord, that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory. But they would not listen.

You shall speak to them this word, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Every jar shall be filled with wine. And they will say to you, Do we not indeed know that every jar will be filled with wine? Then you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will fill with drunkenness all the inhabitants of this land, the kings who sit on David's throne, the priests, the prophets, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will dash them one against another, fathers and sons together, declares the Lord.

I will not pity or spare or have compassion that I should not destroy them. Hear and give ear, be not proud, for the Lord has spoken. Give glory to the Lord your God before He brings darkness, before your feet stumble on the twilight mountains.

And while you look for light, He turns it into gloom and makes it deep darkness. But if you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride. My eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock has been taken captive.

Say to the king and the queen mother, Take a lowly seat, for your beautiful crown has come down from your head. The cities of the Negev are shut up, with none to open them. All Judah is taken into exile, wholly taken into exile.

Lift up your eyes and see, those who come from the north, where is the flock that was given you, your beautiful flock? What will you say when they set as head over you, those whom you yourself have taught to be friends to you? Will not pangs take hold of you, like those of a woman in labor? And if you say in your heart, Why have these things come upon me? It is for the greatness of your iniquity that your skirts are lifted up, and you suffer violence. Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good, who are accustomed to do evil. I will scatter you like chaff, driven by the wind from the desert.

This is your lot, the portion I have measured out to you, declares the Lord, because you have forgotten me and trusted in lies. I myself will lift up your skirts over your face, and your shame will be seen. I have seen your abominations, your adulteries and ne'ings, your lewd whorings, on the hills in the field.

Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will it be before you are made clean? Jeremiah chapter 13 opens with a symbolic action, likely from Jeremiah's earlier ministry. This is followed by oracle material concerning it. Symbolic action is a mode of presentation of the divine word through something akin to an enacted parable.

Jack Lumbom rightly argues for the importance of distinguishing this from a sort of sympathetic magic, some attempt at manipulation through actions performed upon representative objects. Jeremiah performs a similar symbolic action at the beginning of chapter 19 with the pottery jug. Several other such actions are found throughout the book.

Indeed, Jeremiah himself serves as something of a sign to the people. The symbolic action itself involves a loincloth, a loose fitting garment worn around the loins next to the skin. The loincloth is a more intimate garment than many others.

It would also have been worn by the priests. Jeremiah is instructed not to wash the loincloth. The wearing of the loincloth and the later bearing of the loincloth are related.

We should also bear in mind the stage by stage revelation of what Jeremiah is to do with this loincloth. When Jeremiah begins the symbolic action, he and any of the people watching him have no idea of where it is going to go. This might have invited their curiosity which would have served the effectiveness of the sign.

Presumably a period of time elapses between the first word of the Lord given to Jeremiah and the second, and during that period of time his wearing of this loincloth, with no explanation given as to its purpose, might provoke conversation, especially as it was never washed. After having performed the first stage of the symbolic action in wearing the loincloth, Jeremiah is instructed to take the loincloth and bring it to some place where he hides it in the cleft of the rock. There is no reference to a river or to a particular place on the Euphrates here, and many have argued that it is not actually a reference to the Euphrates at all.

Rather it might be a reference to a place called Pera, which was only about 5 miles from Jerusalem and had the sort of rocky situation that would be suitable for performing this particular sign. The southern bank of the river Euphrates might not have had the same rocky conditions. Other commentators have suggested that Jeremiah might have gone to the Euphrates in a vision, otherwise we have to explain his taking a round trip of several hundred miles twice over.

Derek Kidner, however, argues that the laborious nature of such a journey to the Euphrates itself would have been part of what would have made it an effective sign. That said, if Jeremiah did go to the Euphrates, it is highly unlikely that anyone accompanied him. Had he merely gone to Pera, about 5 miles away, it is quite likely that a number of witnesses would have been there to see the action performed.

Once again, in performing this symbolic action, Jeremiah does not know what will happen next. Once again, a significant amount of time elapses, and then the Lord instructs him to return to the place where he placed the loincloth. When he takes out the loincloth, lo and behold, it is good for nothing.

At this point, the word of the Lord comes to him to explain the significance of the symbolic action. First of all, the Lord gives the primary key to the meaning of the enacted parable. The loincloth represents his people.

Just as the loincloth has been spoiled, so his people will be spoiled. The fact that they are good for nothing is seen in the way that they refuse to listen to his words, they stubbornly follow their own hearts, and they have gone after their idols to worship them. The purpose of the loincloth was always to cling to the body of a person.

As a people of the Lord's creation, the purpose of Israel was always to cling to him. Just as the loincloth has an intimate relationship with the body of the wearer, so Judah and Israel were supposed to have an intimate relationship with the Lord, their God. They were to be the Lord's special possession, a manifestation of the holiness of his name, his praise, and also his glory.

And their clinging to the Lord was always to take the form of listening to his voice and faithfully obeying. This opening symbolic action in Oracle is followed by a second prose account. It isn't clear whether the statement, every jar shall be filled with wine, is proverbial or situational.

Brueggemann and Clements, as well as Craigie, Kelly, and Drinkard, all argue that Jeremiah is repeating a proverb here, whereas Lumbum suggests that the setting is that of a feast with wine. Whichever it is, the meaning is not too difficult to discern. There is a shift from the jars that are filled with wine to the people that are filled with wine.

The Lord tests people with wine, with the wine of his fury and wrath. Here the effect of the Lord's filling the people with wine is to render them intoxicated and unstable in their feet. They totter and are dashed into each other.

Perhaps the connection between the people and the jars is to be continued into verse 14, within which the unstable jars of the people smash into each other, to the destruction of all involved. The unheeding people are instructed to hear and give ear in verse 15, where a warning is delivered to them. Before the Lord brings judgment upon them, they are called to give glory to him.

If they do not, while like shepherds they look for the light of the coming morning, the Lord will bring a deeper darkness upon them. Jeremiah describes the way that he will weep for the people if they fail to respond in verse 17. In verses 18 and 19 there is judgment proclaimed upon the leaders of the people, more particularly upon the king and the queen mother, perhaps in this case Jehoiachin and his mother Nehushter.

If they are the figure's address, this would likely have been shortly before 597 BC with the first deportation from Jerusalem. Second Kings chapter 24 verse 12 describes this. And Jehoiachin the king of Judah gave himself up to the king of Babylon, himself and his

mother, and his servants and his officials, and his palace officials.

The king of Babylon took him prisoner in the eighth year of his reign. Verse 20 seems to continue this address to the king and the queen mother. In verse 18 there is the loss of the beautiful crown, and in verse 20 there is the loss of the beautiful flock.

The exiled king and queen mother have suffered the loss of the people that were once committed to their charge. The text of verse 21 is very difficult, and many scholars debate whether some words have been omitted, or whether the text has been distorted in some other manner in its historical transmission. The meaning of the text might be similar to Jeremiah chapter 4 verses 30 to 31.

Judah has been unwise in its choice of its friends. And you, O desolate one, what do you mean that you dress in scarlet, that you adorn yourself with ornaments of gold, that you enlarge your eyes with paint? In vain you beautify yourself. Your lovers despise you.

They seek your life. For I heard a cry as of a woman in labor, anguish as of one giving birth to her first child, the cry of the daughter of Zion, gasping for breath, stretching out her hands. Woe is me! I am fainting before murderers.

Judah and Jerusalem, assured in their innocence, wonder, Why have these things come upon me? To which the Lord makes clear that it is on account of their great sin. The judgment that comes upon them is euphemistically compared to the cruel indignities suffered by women taken captive in warfare. Judah the adulterous bride who has abandoned the Lord, and whom the Lord has now abandoned, is no longer the exalted queen.

She is a common captive of war, stripped of her finery, reduced to a slave, likely to be raped by her enemies. Similar imagery is found in Ezekiel chapter 16 verse 39. And I will give you into their hands, and they shall throw down your vaulted chamber and break down your lofty places.

They shall strip you of your clothes, and take your beautiful jewels, and leave you naked and bare. Again in Nahum chapter 3 verse 5. Behold I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face, and I will make nations look at your nakedness, and kingdoms at your shame. The same image is also used in Isaiah chapter 47 verses 1 to 3 of Babylon itself.

Come down and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon. Sit on the ground without a throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans, for you shall no more be called tender and delicate. Take the millstone and grind flour, put off your veil, strip off your robe, uncover your legs, pass through the rivers.

Your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your disgrace shall be seen. I will take vengeance, and I will spare no one. As we see in the marital parable of Ezekiel chapter

16, the Lord had blessed and dressed his people.

Israel was clothed in marital dress, with the clothing of a priestly and a royal figure. All of that will be removed from her, and she will be utterly ravaged by her enemies. At a number of points in the prophecy of Jeremiah, he speaks of the way that Jerusalem and Judah did not just commit evil in an accidental way, but had become committed to evil.

It had become like a well designed to keep its evil fresh. Here the analogy that he turns to is the skin of an Ethiopian or the spots of a leopard. Jerusalem and Judah's evil has become as distinctive and unchangeable as either the Ethiopian's skin or the leopard's spots.

Against some later racist commentators, it is important to notice that the comparison between the evil of Judah and the Ethiopian's skin does not rest on any association between the skin colour and evil, rather the point is that as an Ethiopian's skin would have distinctively and unchangeably marked him out in the context of 6th century BC Judah, so Judah itself is marked out by its sin. In consequence of Judah's iniquity, judgement will fall upon it, a judgement that is described in three images. They will be scattered like chaff driven by the wind from the desert.

This takes up imagery that we see in Psalm 1 concerning the wicked on the day of judgement. The second image is an ironic one of the parceling out of land. Judah is going to be uprooted from the land from their sin, but a new lot is being apportioned to them.

The portion that the Lord is measuring out for them is a portion of shame and dishonour, an inheritance that they are receiving on account of their sin. The final imagery is similar to the one in verse 22. Judah is the unfaithful, adulterous and prostituting bride and as a result she is going to be stripped of her finery by the Lord.

As her royal skirts are removed, she is laid bare before her enemies, who will utterly humiliate her. The horrific sexual imagery implied here should not be sugarcoated. It is of peace with the other jarring sexual imagery that is used of Judah and Jerusalem in the book of Jeremiah.

Judah is the beloved bride of the Lord who is turned adulterous and then turned into a prostitute that will throw herself before any man. Pathetically she dresses up as if to seduce former lovers who are now going to destroy her and now she is stripped of all her finery and reduced to a war slave to be raped by her captors. The horrific ugliness and cruelty of the image may turn our stomachs, but it is well calculated to communicate the pathos, the horror and the true scandal of the story of Judah.

A question to consider, what are some other examples in scripture of symbolic actions? 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 All your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered

worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering. Since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted, as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and may fulfil every resolve for good, and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. The salutation with which 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 begins is almost identical to that of 1 Thessalonians, with the slight alteration of God the Father to God our Father, and the addition of from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ at the end of verse 2. This epistle was likely written fairly shortly after the first epistle.

Paul still seems to be ministering with Silas and Timothy, the missionary team that first worked among the Thessalonians, and the epistle is addressed from them. However, as in 1 Thessalonians, Paul is the actual writer of the epistle throughout. In verse 17 of chapter 3, I Paul write this greeting with my own hand.

This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine. It is the way I write. Even though the letter is addressed from Paul, Silvanus and Timothy then, Paul is the sole author.

The main thing that the changes from 1 Thessalonians in the introduction underline is the fact that the grace and peace aren't primarily from Paul and the other missionaries, but from God himself. As before, Paul moves from this to express their continued thanksgiving for the Thessalonians, now presented not in terms of their actual practice, but as their fitting response to what God has done and is doing in the Thessalonians. Their increasing faith and love for each other is evidence of the work of God's grace among them.

The missionaries boast about the Thessalonians and all the other churches that they go to, on account of the Thessalonians' steadfastness and faith through trial. While some of the Thessalonians might be discouraged, Paul and his fellow missionaries cannot hold in the delight and the joy and the pride that they have in seeing the way that the Thessalonians are growing and prospering in their faith. And like doting grandparents with pictures of their grandchildren, they can't help but go everywhere and show everyone and tell everyone about what God is doing among them.

The steadfastness of the Thessalonians in affliction is evidence of the righteous judgement of God. It is an anticipatory sign in the present of their future vindication.

Their faithful suffering for righteousness' sake identifies them as those who are blessed, as those who will be vindicated in the day of judgement.

Persecution is the path that leads to the inheritance of the kingdom, and those who find themselves on it have cause to rejoice, for their vindication will come. They are suffering for the kingdom, which is itself a sign of God's grace. There's a paradoxical character to all of this.

Suffering is not usually a positive sign, but for the Christian it can be. This evidence of their future vindication is also a sign that they are considered worthy of the kingdom. This is not something they have earned, so much as a matter of grace, God has marked them out by suffering, graciously declaring them worthy of his inheritance.

We might think about the reaction of the apostles to their persecution in Acts 5.41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name. God's justice will be seen in the way that he will repay their persecutors for their evil, while rewarding the Thessalonians, the missionaries and all suffering Christians with relief. This will occur when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in fiery judgement, enacting divine wrath on all who do not know God, those who reject the knowledge of God that has been given in the Son, and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The language of judgement for not obeying the gospel may seem arresting to us. What does it mean to obey the gospel? The gospel is, at heart, the message of Christ's lordship and kingdom. To obey the gospel is to submit to this, to Jesus as Lord.

Paul alludes to Isaiah 66, verse 15 here. For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. When this time comes, those who disobey the summons to bow their knee to Jesus Christ will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, and exile from the presence of the Lord and of his glory.

They are confined to outer darkness, cut off from all of the blessings and the goodness of God's special presence. Once again, Paul is borrowing language from the Old Testament prophets. Here it's the language of Isaiah chapter 2, verse 10.

Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from before the terror of the Lord and from the splendour of his majesty. It's worth noting that Paul is taking up an Old Testament statement where the Lord refers to Yahweh, and he is relating it here to Jesus. We should also consider the way that Paul frames eternal destinies here.

The emphasis is not upon two places, heaven and hell, but upon two different relations in which people stand to the glory and presence of the person of Jesus Christ. One party are brought into and vindicated in the presence and manifest and participate in the

glory, and the other party is utterly cut off from them, experiencing absolute, utter and final loss. Heaven is, at its very root, not a place so much as the glorious presence of a person.

Heaven is where we enjoy Christ, the new heavens and the new earth, where Christ is present with his people. When Christ comes, he will be glorified in his holy ones. The church will display and reflect his glory, and he will be glorified in her, a people refined as gold through suffering.

Paul's constant prayer is that God will make the Thessalonians worthy of his calling. This way of describing things, of God making them worthy of his calling, makes clear that the worthiness is something that God produces in his people. We will be judged according to works on the last day, but the works are ways in which God has conformed us to the judgment that he has made concerning us.

The declaration of justification is worked out, to borrow an illustration from the early Luther, in some ways like a sculptor who declares the sculpture that he is going to produce from the block of marble before he has begun to fashion it. The judgment is proleptic. It anticipates the way that God will conform us to that judgment.

God calls us, and then he makes us worthy of his calling. The calling happens first, and then we are made worthy of what we have been called for. This process is one in which we are active as God's transforming power works in us and through us.

We are never the final source of the action though. The end of all of this is that the name of the Lord Jesus is glorified in us. We are his workmanship, and when people see us, they see what he has created in us.

And then we are also glorified in him. The grace of God and the Lord Jesus Christ is that which governs this entire process of salvation, from beginning to end. At no point does it rest upon anything other than God's unmerited goodness towards us and his Son.

A question to consider. The letters to the Thessalonians should encourage us to think much more about Christ's final coming and the age to come. How might Paul's teaching here change the way that we think about the new heavens and the new earth?