

I couldn't believe it—I just couldn't! My goodness, these are kindergarteners, I thought! See, my daughter just joined a new dance studio, and after one of her lessons my wife Jeni came home and shared with me what some of the other moms were talking about.

One mom was describing how her daughter was ridiculed at school for eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich at lunch. I guess the PB&J had leaked out the sides of the bread and the other kids thought it looked gross. And because the teasing was so bad, she's apparently begged her mom to never make the traditional sandwich for her ever again. Can *you* believe it?!

Another mom was talking about how her girl, who's by no means overweight, is already struggling with body image issues. I mean, you look at this girl, and you think what a lovely, cute, sweet little girl, but apparently the other girls in her class call her fat. Again, she's not at all, but even if she was, I mean, c'mon, she's like five! Can you believe that either?!

But the last one, well this I *really* couldn't believe! Now, I remember how middle school was for me—having to wear the right brands and the right styles to fit in—but this other mom was saying how she had just bought her daughter a bunch of nice new clothes for the school year, and already on the first day her little girl was laughed at, picked on, and shunned by the group, all because she didn't dress like the “cool girls” . . . in her *kindergarten class*! How about that—can you believe it?! I know for me—I just couldn't believe it!

But as hard as *all that* is to believe—can you believe what St. John the Apostle tells us this morning?! Here he is, getting a sneak preview of things to come. God drops a quarter in his viewfinder, and as John's looking this way and that, this is what he sees. There's these angels . . . and a Lamb upon a throne . . . and the whole heavenly community's there praising this Lamb and fanning Him with palm branches. But then, John reports that these saints—people no different from me—actually couldn't *be* more different from me. Not only are they praising and waving palm branches, but I can't believe how they're dressed—in white robes—*white robes*! John says. I mean, it leaves me wondering, do I dress the part? Would I fit in? Am I able to match? Ignore the fact that right now I'm wearing white robes . . . I'm talking more than cotton or polyester—I mean, innocence and purity, *worthiness* before God. Without that, heaven couldn't be more far away, more out of reach for me.

Let me explain. Today, we're starting to see how scary the internet can be. While it's a great tool for staying in touch and grabbing instant information, it definitely has its downsides. One of those downsides is a new website called Instant Checkmate. Before this site came out, if you wanted to know someone's arrest record, you'd have to actually go to the county court office and formally request that individual's information. That process would take anywhere between days and weeks, or such information might not even be available at all. But with Instant Checkmate, a background check takes just a few clicks and not much more than a minute. In fact, this website shows not only criminal records, but even court records, various licenses, previous addresses, phone numbers, birthdates, estimated income levels, and even satellite imagery of known addresses. If it does all that right now, who's to say it won't include more embarrassing information in the future?! It's really pretty scary when you think about it. And it's all available to anyone with an internet connection. Imagine, making a few mistakes because you were young, stupid, just weren't thinking, and then never being able to live it down. Your own personal history available for everyone to see!

If you typed in your name—if any one of us here typed in your name—what would the results show? Would we look at you any differently? Would we get up and switch pews if you sat down next to us? Would we avoid eye contact? That's what I mean about those white robes. I know that ain't me! *God knows* that ain't me! Remember a few weeks ago, when Jesus told that parable comparing the kingdom of heaven to a wedding feast—remember what happened to the guy who didn't meet the dress code? The king comes and says to him, “Hey buddy, how'd you get in here without a wedding garment?” and then he turns to his attendants and says to—and I quote—“Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the

outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Well, right now, I kinda feel like that guy. I don’t dress the part. I don’t fit in. I don’t match. No, before God who knows my whole history, I am sullied and soiled, ragged and tattered, I am raw, naked, and exposed. White robes—don’t think so—not this guy. And maybe you know what I mean. If you do, maybe you also just can’t believe how even *heaven itself* would pick on us like a buncha kindergarten girls. But, I guess it’s time to face facts.

But then, I look up here—and I remember. You know who else was sullied and soiled, ragged and tattered, raw, naked, and exposed? This guy (Jesus). In fact, nobody’s history is as disgusting as His was. Jeffrey Dahmer —no. Osama Bin Laden —not even. Adolf Hitler—guess again. Jesus is worse than all of them combined. No, He was so bad, in fact, that the sun refused to shine. The earth quaked it was so sick to its stomach. Even His own Father turned His back on Him—My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

It wasn’t because of anything Jesus had done Himself, of course. But cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree, the Bible says. And it was on His accursed tree that everyone was hanged. Jesus bore the sins of the world—everyone’s—no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Hitler, Dahmer, Bin Laden, you and me—we were all there. And it was right there on that human garbage dump that our histories got cleaned up.

Which makes me wonder—if Jesus cast off His outer garment to go to the cross, if He even set aside His beauty, His honor, His righteousness, to bear our sin and be our Savior, then what’s happened to it? Well, at the start of the service we got our answer. That baby over there, Titus, he’s no different from us. As the rite of Baptism says, “we are all conceived and born sinful and are under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as His own. We’d be lost forever unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation. But the Father of all mercy and grace has sent His Son Jesus Christ, who atoned for the sin of the whole world, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” Just moments ago, Titus came before God in his birthday suit—his soul as raw, as naked, as exposed, as the day he was born. But you’ll notice that he is also dressed in the color of the saints, he is wearing white.

See, from ancient times, the Church has always taken her newly reborn children and dressed them up in special baptismal garments, swaddled them up in Jesus Christ. Our hymnal even offers it as part of the baptismal rite, and it goes like this: “Receive this white garment to show that you have been clothed with the robe of Christ’s righteousness that covers all your sin. So shall you stand without fear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive the inheritance prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” The baptismal garment is a visible sign of an invisible reality. Stripping off the clothes is a symbol of taking off the “old Adam,” shedding the old life of sin. And putting on new white vestments is symbolic of receiving the holiness of Christ.

Right here at this font, Titus offered to God nothing but His sin, and God took that sin and washed it away. In Baptism, God wrapped him up in the beauty, the honor, the righteousness that Christ set aside for him. It’s as St. Paul says in Galatians 3:27, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.” And now, in that great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands . . . we can make out the face of Titus. He is dressed the part, he fits right in, he matches perfectly. By Baptism, Titus’ robe is washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb.

Ever since she was a little girl, JoAnn had dreamed about her wedding day—the church, the crowd, the cake, but most especially the dress. She had it all picked out—the satin, the lace, the pearls—it was going to be beautiful. Finally, after four years of dating, Greg mustered up the courage and proposed to her. She now had eleven months before the wedding date to get the dress of her dreams.

Excitedly, her mother, her sisters, her maid of honor, and JoAnn all went to the store to find her special dress. Clacking hangers on the racks, it felt like she passed through hundreds of dresses, before finally finding the one she’d always imagined. She pulled it down quickly, held it up to her body, and sashayed in front of the mirror with it. It was perfect—exactly what she wanted—and hurrying to the dressing room, she tried it on. Coming out, she got lots of reactions—gasps, clapping, big smiles, squeals, bodies bouncing up and down—everyone agreed it was the perfect dress for her.

She looked at the price tag—well, it's stretching the budget a little, but I'll manage. Getting to the cash register, however, it was another story. Apparently, it had been mismarked, and because the dress was so nice they just couldn't discount it (even after their mistake). JoAnn was crushed—her dreams came crashing down. Hanging her head, holding back the sobs, it was all JoAnn could do to make it out of the store. Her mom rubbing her shoulder, JoAnn collapsed into her arms and let it all out. She just couldn't believe it—that dress she had waited for her whole life now felt so far away, so out of reach. A few days went by, and JoAnn had pretty much given up her dreams and was starting to come to terms with never fitting into her fantasy. That seemed to be all over now. Time to face facts.

Then one evening, as she was coming home from work, she found a package waiting at her door. That's funny, she thought to herself, I'm not expecting anything. JoAnn bent down and picked it up. The return address was none other than the bridal store she was at just days ago. In an instant, she fumbled for her keys, opened the lock as fast as she could, flung the door wide open, and rushed inside. No time for scissors! She tore into the box with just her nails. There was the dress—the very same she'd always wanted, but now didn't think she'd ever have—and sitting on top of it there was a note.

It read:

"Dearest JoAnne, my life, my love,

"Heard about your troubles the other day. I live to make your dreams come true. May you feel as beautiful on our wedding day, as you look to me every day.

"Forever yours, Greg."

They say that the Baptism font is the door to heaven. Jesus says, "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit." And whether it's here today like Titus, or thirty-four years ago in Florida like me, or whenever and wherever your Baptism took place, God has left each of us a box. It is everything you always wished you could be, and nothing you ever thought you could be. But nevertheless, it is yours. Open it up! Try it on! Wear it proudly! Maybe this sermon is the little note God's left sitting on top for you. With Baptism, nothing's far away, nothing's out of reach—your dreams really do come true. Can't believe it? It can be tough sometimes. But, y'know, maybe it's time to face facts.