

Sermon “God May Not Look How We Expect”

Psst. I hear there’s going to be a drag show in the Pilgrim Room this afternoon. Oh, you already knew? Here I thought I had that good town gossip. I joke, but I actually want to spend some time this morning situating drag performance in a broader theological context, because I think it illuminates beautiful dimensions for how we are called to live—not just those of us who love to throw on a dress or their finest butch suit and relish the glory of performance, but everybody. And listen, you find me on the street sometime in Camden, I will give you the whole rundown of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and how gender is essentially an inherently repeated performance—love me some queer theory. But here we are in church. It’s Sunday. And so I want to dig into how the Bible and what we do in both the pews and the streets is intimately related to what’s going to happen in the Pilgrim room in a few hours.

If you’ve heard me preach before, this is quite a departure from my usual style. I’m a big ‘ol Bible nerd, and I love nothing better than diving headlong into a single text, teasing out the nuances, exploring dimensions we might not typically hear on a first reading. But even for anyone who hasn’t opened a Bible recently, you probably guessed that the Scripture I just read does not come from a single chapter. I compiled that found poem of sorts from a dozen or so different texts because what I hope you hear this morning is the way that the Bible rhymes with itself across the pages—some of the overarching themes that become clear in the way stories talk with one another.

One of these throughlines that’s fascinating to me is the number of folks who take on disguises at various parts through the Bible (and there are lots more than what I could fit into our reading today!) Sometimes these pop up in tender and heartrending scenes, like when Joseph disguises himself so his brothers will not recognize him, as he tests whether or not they’re still the same people who beat and left him for dead. Other times, disguises are a way of pursuing physical safety, like when Abraham disguises Sarah as his sister to protect her from a foreign king. Elsewhere, disguises are deployed for trickery, to give the underdog a chance to win, like when Jacob’s momma puts goat skins all over his smooth arms so his father will think he’s his much-hairier brother, and give Jacob his inheritance. (Total side note, there’s some fascinating commentary on masculinity in that story. Jacob, the original drag king—but I digress.) Still other times, disguises are deployed in the narrative for humorous effect. Honest to God, I don’t know if there’s a funnier moment in the entire Bible than when Jesus shows up to the disciples on the road while they’re in the middle of mourning his crucifixion. He walks up, we read, and has somehow used some Jesus magic to configure his appearance so the disciples don’t recognize him. And what does he do? He pokes fun at them! “What’s up?” he asks. “Why you so sad?” And then he gets them to tell him exactly how much they love him while they travel together, before at dinner, he’s like “Surprise! It’s me, Jesus!” All-time classic prank.

But perhaps my favorite disguise in the whole Bible is when Jesus approaches Mary Magdalene, weeping outside his tomb. We read that he’s dressed as a gardener and she does not know him until he calls her out by name. She hears the voice of the one she loves, and in that moment of recognition, she experiences the fullness of the resurrection. New life, it seems, does not always look like we expected.

What’s so resonant to me, is that these are many of the themes at the heart of drag performance. Drag, too, is multifaceted, meaning different things to different performers—each

number carrying the potential to run the gamut from campy and hilarious, to earnest and heartfelt, or even a focal point for righteous anger. This morning, I want to pull at those same threads I was playing with in stories of biblical disguises: Safety. Humor. Tenderness. Joy.

The first time I took the stage in drag, I wasn't out of the closet yet, but I knew who I was. My seminary hosted a drag show and, much to the surprise of some of my classmates, I signed up to perform. In retrospect, I'm not sure the fluidity of my sexuality and gender were *that* much of a surprise to others, but for myself, drag offered the chance to reveal an essential part of who I was in a context that felt safe. Choreographing the number, donning my dress, my wig, my makeup, I was in control. Just as Joseph is in control when he puts on a disguise so he can guide and shape the process of his brothers' reconciliation. Particularly for those of us who have felt shame about or have been threatened because of our identities, this act of ownership is crucial. I was called gay so many times by other people before I ever had the chance to claim sexuality for myself. For queer folks, our bodies become sites of cultural debate, arguments about laws and policies, fights over whether children should be exposed to books featuring characters that look like us. Our bodies are rarely just our own. But when I put on a beautiful dress and dance, when I carefully construct a look to project how I am feeling, I am inviting the world into my interior life on my own terms.

Humor, likewise, becomes a language for talking about difficult, even painful experiences in a way that returns agency. And it nurtures community. Drag often plays with audacious camp and rowdy humor to forge connection between the performer and the audience. But peel that layer back a little, and we see another, more painful truth. Humor humanizes us. It invites the listener to see the fullness of who you are as a person, all of the abundant life. And that is a political act in a country that has too often dehumanized queer people. That big, fabulous entrance, "Hello darling," is a lighthearted way to say, "I am here. You will see me. I will not be silenced by this world or any forces that would rather pretend I do not exist." Who are, as we speak, trying to legislate our nonexistence. That's what's underneath the joke.

What I hope you hear in those words is the tenderness that fills so much drag performance. The willingness to bare oneself to a world that has not always treated you with kindness—to face the persecution, discrimination, and violence—and respond with love. Respond with beauty. If you come today, you'll hear me singing about longing, about my deep yearning to build community where every child grows up knowing that who they are is beautiful, and holy, and sacred. That the defining word about their lives might be God's voice saying "I know your inmost parts, I knit them in your mother's womb," proclaiming through the psalmist, "You are fearfully and wonderfully made." This summer, I'm joining the board of OUTMaine, and I am going to do everything in my power to build wider communities that embody this truth, but that's long and difficult work. Love cannot uproot in an instant what bigotry spent years building. And yet, on a stage on a Sunday afternoon in Midcoast Maine, we can create space where that spirit of love and welcome radiates. There is a joy in that.

Joy. It's one of our most primal prayers, gratitude to God for the wonder of existence. When folks throw on a beautiful dress or a power suit, when they don feathers or wings, or glitter—that playfulness is part of thanking the One who created us this way. It's the same joy that Joseph experienced when their father Jacob gave them that beautiful dress and they felt radiant in its technicolor splendor. It's the same joy that filled David's limbs as he stripped down to just a linen thong and danced with wild abandon. It's Miriam's joy when she plays the tambourine after the Israelites make it through the Red Sea, the kind that says "I can't believe I got through what I got through but I am here, I am alive, and thank God for that." It's the same

joy I felt the first time I put on makeup and saw a part of who I am reflected back in the mirror in a way that made me feel beautiful and proud. Like I didn't have to hide anymore.

And part of why I wanted to speak from the pulpit this morning, is I wanted to thank this congregation for offering that gift. It's not every church that would give space so a bunch of queer folks from the community can host a drag brunch. Even for churches who are open and affirming, I sometimes find that "welcome" still only extends as far as queerness can make itself fit within cisheterosexual norms. And I can't tell you what it means to me personally, as a queer person and someone who calls this church home as often as I am able, to feel the same kind of abundant welcome in these pews that I feel from God.

I included one last text in my little poem, one that might have felt a little at odds with the others, maybe you caught it: Lot's wife, looking back, turned into a pillar of salt. Gotta be honest, it's not often I preach that story. The Sodom and Gomorrah texts have been wielded for so long to hurt people like me, they're not often pages to which my heart is drawn. But, without getting too bogged down in exegesis, the homophobia people ascribe to that chapter is a calamitous misreading of the text. In Ezekiel, the prophet himself says "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned. They did not help the poor and needy." The sin of Sodom isn't homosexuality, it was violence and inhospitality. Even as we leave those harmful biblical tropes, there can be an awful temptation to turn back, to regress to what is familiar, instead of moving toward what is righteous.

Events like today's drag brunch are a proclamation: We are not turning back. Not today, not ever. When you experience the love and beauty that God longs for us to share, when you see people living into the joy for which we all were created, it is a foretaste of heaven—visceral experience of a different world. A world where nobody experiences discrimination because of their gender identity. A world where no child grows up ashamed of their sexuality. A world where each and every one of us feels the delight of being embodied, wrapped in tender flesh, connected to one another, united by the power of laughter, dance and song. The resurrected one I follow promises I will live to see that world. Today, I invite you to glimpse it with me.

### Lesson Text from June 2 "Let The People Say"

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness;<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub> come into God's presence with singing.  
And David danced before the Lord with all his might, wearing just a linen cloth  
Jacob made Joseph a beautiful dress.

And Jesus said "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known."

There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ

But Michal, the daughter of Saul, came out to meet him. She said in disgust, "How distinguished the king of Israel looked today, shamelessly exposing himself like any vulgar person might do!"  
Joseph's brothers plotted to kill him. "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's throw him into one of these cisterns."

though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him

"And look," Jacob replied to Rebekah, "my brother, Esau, is a hairy man, and my skin is smooth.  
So she covered his arms and the smooth part of his neck with the skin of the young goats.

The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "I will disguise myself and go into the battle,"

Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him for he disguised himself.

“Flee for your life;” they told Lot, “do not look back or stop.” But Lot’s wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

While they were talking, Jesus himself came near but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. Jesus asked her, “Why are you crying?” At this she turned around saw Jesus standing there but did not recognize him, thinking he was the gardener. Still, the psalmist said, “Let them praise God’s name with dancing.”

You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.