

We all know that appearances matter. When officials at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, wanted to advertise their college to high school students a couple years back, they found that they had a problem. It had been a snowless winter in Williamstown. However, the officials felt that snow would make their college look more inviting to prospective students. Hence, they imported 60 tons of manufactured snow and posed student models beside the "snowdrifts."

A defensive director of admissions explained, "We're not faking anything. We are just hoping to get some good winter shots." It was, after all, real snow off real trucks. (1)

Playwright Gore Vidal says that when his play The Best Man was being cast back in 1959, Ronald Reagan was proposed for the lead role of the distinguished front-running Presidential candidate. He was rejected. It was decided that he lacked the "Presidential look."

Appearances matter. I like the story of the woman who was out in the yard working when a moving van pulled up next door. She walked over to welcome the newcomers to the neighborhood wearing her dirty work clothes. The following week, the new neighbors invited her and her husband to a housewarming party. The woman wanted to make a better impression this time. She colored her hair, struggled into a girdle, painted her lips, applied eye shadow and false eyelashes, painted her fingernails, and popped in her contact lenses. She admired herself in the mirror and said to her husband, "Well, tonight they are going to see the real me!"

Appearances matter. And God wants to give us all a new look.

chapter 61 of Isaiah. Jesus used the first part of this chapter to announce his ministry, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor..." Beautiful words, powerful words. But note the less familiar words that follow because they refer to our new look, "...and (to) provide for those who grieve in Zion, to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor."

Isaiah is writing about those who are grieving over a fallen Israel. BABYLONIAN EXILE He is writing about folks who are feeling defeated, disappointed, down-hearted, and he is telling them that someday they will be called "oaks of righteousness...." That's quite a change of appearance, from defeated, disappointed, down-hearted to sturdy, erect and proud, like oaks.

Well, here's the good news for the morning. It matters not how defeated we may be feeling, how down on ourselves or our world we may be. Christ offers us the opportunity to stand tall and proud and victorious. How does it happen? Isaiah tells us about the changes God would make in our appearance.

One of my complaints is when the Church liturgists decide to cut verses from the scripture readings. What Isaiah says next is missing from our reading but you can find it in your Bibles.

FIRST OF ALL, HE SAYS THAT GOD WILL PROVIDE US WITH "A CROWN OF BEAUTY INSTEAD OF ASHES." Ashes are the symbol of grieving, mourning, despair. During Lent people put ashes on their foreheads as a sign of contrition and repentance. There is a time for ashes, but according to Isaiah, God's yearning is to replace our ashes with a crown of beauty. One translation says a garland of beauty.

The crown and the garland are symbols of victory not defeat. They say to the world, "Here is a winner." Can you imagine the change that would take place in our lives if you and I had that sense of confidence, poise, and self-worth, of knowing that we are winners? Imagine yourself right now wearing a crown or a garland of beauty.

I was reading recently about former college and pro football star Pat Haden. When Pat played football in the pros, he was small by today's standards, only 5' 10-1/2". He was also light " only 173 pounds. Still, he had a gift " and I am not referring to his athletic ability. The gift was a voice inside his head that said, "Pat, you can do it."

"You can do it, Pat," his two older brothers used to tell him when he was a little boy. "You can do it, Pat," they told him when his wobbly passes dropped to the ground. "You can do it, Pat," they told him when he was stuck on a school project. And they would encourage him to work harder. "You can do it, Pat. You can do it."

"I ended up knowing that I could do anything I wanted to do," Pat remembered years later. And time after time Pat Haden beat the odds and proved the confidence of his older brothers to be correct, "You can do it, Pat." (2)

Don't you wish you had an older brother like those two older brothers? The good news is you do. So do I. Christ came into this world to tell us that we can do it. This is the Good News that Jesus announces when he refers to this passage in the incident in the synagogue we find in Luke. We can be more than conquerors through him who loves us. If we have the faith even of a mustard seed, we can move mountains. All things are possible to those who believe. We can do it. Christ didn't come into our world that we might wear the ashes of defeat. He came into the world that we might wear the beautiful garland of victory. God has for each of us a crown of beauty.

IN THE SECOND PLACE, GOD HAS FOR US "THE OIL OF GLADNESS INSTEAD OF MOURNING...."

When Christ comes into our lives we receive an attitude adjustment, from sad to glad. Some followers of Jesus could use that kind of adjustment. Some saints must be a pain even for God to endure.

It's like three women who arrived at the Pearly Gates at the same time. St. Peter came but said he had some pressing business and would they please wait. He was gone for a long time, but finally he came back and called one of the women in and asked her if she minded waiting.

"No," she said, "I've looked forward to this for so long. I love God and can't wait to meet Jesus. I don't mind at all." St. Peter then said, "Well I have one more question. How do you spell 'God?'"

She said, "Capital-G-o-d." St. Peter said, "Go right on in."

He went out and got one of the other women, told her to come on inside, and said, "Did you mind waiting?" She said, "Oh, no. I have been a Christian for fifty years, and I'll spend eternity here. I didn't mind at all." So St. Peter said, "Just one more thing. How do you spell 'God?'" She said, "G-o-d. No, I mean capital-G."

St. Peter said that was good and sent her on in to Heaven. He went back out and invited the third woman in and asked her if she minded waiting. "Yes, I did," she said huffily. "I've had to stand in line all my life: at the supermarket, when I went to school, when I registered my children for school, when I went to the movies, everywhere, and I resent having to wait in line for Heaven!" St. Peter said, "Well that's all right for you to feel that way. It won't be held against you, but there is just one more question. How do you spell 'Czechoslovakia?'"⁽³⁾ **antidisestablishmentarianism** originally, opposition to the disestablishment of the Church of England, now opposition to the belief that there should no longer be an official church in a country

G. K. Chesterton once said, "Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian." Not every Christian believes that. There are some Christians who believe if you are truly pious, you wear a perpetual frown.

One of the greatest preachers the Christian faith ever produced was one of those who promoted a sour-faced faith. His name was Chrysostom. Preaching at the end of the fourth century, he saw jollity as pagan. He declared that Christians must weep for their sins. He contended that God doesn't want his children to play. Chrysostom believed if the devil can get people engaged in frivolity, he's won the day. Even saints and Fathers of the Church can get it wrong.

What foolishness. Isaiah tells us that God will give us "the oil of gladness..." Chesterton is right. Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian. It's like the old story of a man strolling through a social club. He is surprised to see three men and a dog playing cards. Pausing to watch, he asks, "Can that dog really play cards?" "You bet," answers one of the members. "That's incredible!" the man says. "Not really," another member shrugs. "He's really not that good. Whenever he gets a good hand, he wags his tail."

Friends, you and I are holding a good hand. We are God's own elect. How can we help but show our happiness? We don't have tails to wag but we have smiles to give. He gives us a crown of beauty. He gives us the oil of gladness.

FINALLY, ACCORDING TO ISAIAH, HE GIVES US A GARMENT OF PRAISE INSTEAD OF A SPIRIT OF DESPAIR. That's how He finishes our wardrobe. A crown of beauty, then oil of gladness, and finally, a robe of praise.

I love to be around someone who is robed in a garment of praise, don't you? C. Ward Crampton, a noted gerontologist, lists five qualities of living which are necessary for healthy aging. One of these is praising God. There is something about praising God that is healthy for soul, mind and body. Of course, like any great gift of God, even praise can be abused.

Story about the head man in a village in Pakistan. He asked the members of a little Christian church in the village to move to the edge of town from next door to his house. He offered to work out an exchange of properties if they would do it. He was concerned his Muslim wives, hearing the joyful singing of the Christians, would be influenced. They might even become Christians.

He had good cause to be threatened. If we truly came into this place of worship each week with a spirit of praise, the world would be trying to break down the walls to join us. And we would profit from the experience as well. Praise is to nourishment to our souls. It lifts us to higher ground.

This then is the new look God would give us. We who once floundered in defeat and darkness can stand tall, proud and steadfast as "oaks of righteousness." He gives us "a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."

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1. "College Out to 'Snow' Students," The Knoxville News-Sentinel (Feb. 22, 1989), Section A, p. 7.
 2. Contributed " source unknown.
 3. The Rev. Patrick Napier in HOMETOWN HUMOR, U.S.A., Loyal Jones and Billy Edd Wheeler, eds, (Little Rock: August House Publishers, 1991).
 4. J. B. Fowler, Jr., ILLUSTRATED SERMONS FOR SPECIAL OCCASIONS, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1988).

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