

"Our Work Clothes"

First Sunday of Christmas
10:00 a.m. Sunday, January 1, 2012
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Isaiah 61:10–62:3

No doubt that some of you received some article of clothing for Christmas. Maybe some of you are even wearing those new clothes today. In years past, I always asked for, and received, a sweater or two at Christmas time. It seems that I am extremely hard on them, always snagging them somewhere or ruining the sleeves by pulling them up to my elbows, which I have a tendency to do.

The great storyteller, O. Henry, wrote a delightful tale once about clothing. It was actually about a robbery that failed because of clothes. The main characters were these two thieves: one man who was very big and not very bright; the other a smaller man who was the brains of the outfit. Their plan was simple: dress the bigger guy up as a policeman, position him outside the bank, then, when his partner was escaping with the loot, pretend to arrest him and drive off with the money together. A perfect plan! How could they lose?

There was only one problem – the fake policeman, you know, the big one who wasn't very smart. The whole caper started out well. He went and stood by the bank, looking for all the world like any real officer of the law. But because he looked so real, people treated him like a real policeman and asked him for help. And he couldn't refuse, because if he did, people would know that he was a phony. So, he helped a little boy across the street; he offered directions to a young man who was lost, and he was really getting into his role. Finally, having acted like an honest policeman all day, he arrested his own partner in the act of robbing the bank.

The story is titled, "Clothes Make the Man." It's a familiar theme. He looked like a policeman, so he was treated like one, and having been treated like one, he believes he is one and he acts like one.

Do you remember the story of Cinderella? It's the same theme. There she is, in the corner crying because she wants to go to the big dance and can't. A wave of her fairy godmother's wand and "voilà" – off she goes, dressed in a beautiful gown. The result? She's the hit of the party, the prince marries her, and it's happily-ever-after time. What changed about the young woman? Only her clothes!

The prophet Isaiah's voice has been heard these past weeks as we have journeyed through Advent. We heard those familiar words of hope on Advent 2: "Comfort, O Comfort, my people." On Advent 3 we heard his voice proclaim, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." And on Christmas Eve, we heard, "For a child has been born for us!" All wonderful images of the season that brought hope and comfort as we awaited the birth of Christ.

Today, we hear the prophet using the imagery of clothes in that portion from the last part of his book read as our first lesson. But we need to understand the historical scene into which his words were spoken if we want to know the significance of that image he presents.

The people of Israel have been captives in Babylon. For almost 40 years they have been held hostage in a foreign country, far away from the Promised Land, their beloved Jerusalem and the sacred temple. Finally, as if by a miracle, Cyrus, King of Persia, defeats the Babylonians and decrees that the Israelites can go home. So, across the wilderness they trek, carrying all their earthly possessions.

This is God's own chosen people, but they are a dreary lot. They are weak from fatigue, clothes tattered and torn from years in exile, hearts and souls beaten with all the waiting. And they come back to Jerusalem, their home, only to discover that it is a pile of rubble and ruin. Their temple, the center of their life in community, is a mass of rock and mortar all in a heap. And the Ark of the Covenant is gone.

It is in the midst of this scene that Isaiah the prophet offers words of encouragement and hope. In spite of the ruin around them and the condition of their clothes and country, Isaiah tells the people:

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
My whole being shall exult in my God;
For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
He has covered me with the robe of righteousness.

What wonderful imagery for a chest-fallen people. Isaiah is reminding his people of God's promise, a promise made long ago, that God chose them, the Israelites, as his people, and that he would bless the world through them. The promise has not been broken; God will act to clothe and dress them – a broken, disheartened people. He will clothe them with salvation and righteousness. They are his people still, Isaiah reminds them.

Let's jump 2,000 years of history and let me ask the question: what about the clothes that we wear? I'm not talking about sweaters received as presents under a tree now. I'm talking about who we are in this world. I'm talking about our identities. If "clothes make the man or woman," as O. Henry's story claimed, what kind of clothes do we wear?

There are many people who come before God and stand dressed in clothes they have tried to stitch together out of their own good works and deeds. They try to make themselves presentable to God with a robe of *self*-righteousness, a robe patched together of the times they helped someone, or "look here," we say to God, "see where I took food to that lady down the street whose husband just died; and here is where I remembered to read my Bible every day for a week; and here is that kind word I spoke to those neighbor kids I can't stand; and here is where I prayed every day for Uncle Bill to get better. See Lord! See my robe! I made it!"

Luther used to say that standing before God we are all beggars. Before God we stand naked and vulnerable and exposed for what and who we really are. If you and I were to gather up all our good deeds and all our good works and sow them together, it would be a pathetic rag to try to cover ourselves. We need to remind ourselves of this from time to

time, lest we get a distorted picture of who and what we really are. We are sinners, by nature, in need of covering.

That's why Isaiah's imagery is so appropriate, even for us living 2,000 years later. As we stand before God and each other, who supplies the clothing? God does – the garment of salvation and the robe of righteousness – gifts of his hands, clothes of his making.

And there is no better time to be reminded of that than now, right after we've witnessed the revelation of God's love and righteousness in the form of a small baby born in a stable long ago in Bethlehem and as we stand on the edge of this New Year. Jesus is born – the son of God, the son of Israel, the one who in his person brings the robe of righteousness for us. God, once again, supplies the clothing for his people. We can't make our own. Before God, we stand naked. But because of his gift of Jesus, the Christ, we can come to God and he accepts us, forgives us, loves us.

One more important word about these clothes God gives us – these robes of righteousness. They aren't just party clothes to be folded in tissue paper and neatly tucked away in the bottom dresser drawer until next Christmas. They're not meant to be worn only for special occasions, like baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals. God's clothes are strong, durable, work clothes. They're meant to be worn every day in this New Year where we do our living – on the job, in school, at the store, in our homes. They're meant to stand up to the praising and praying, the giving and helping, the witness and struggle and pain and joy and tears that is part of the life of God's people everyday.

And you know what? The rest of the world will see it; they'll see it because, like the man dressed as the policeman, we will act and behave and talk in a new way, because I am convinced, once we really see that it is God who clothes us, once we really come to know his love and his unbelievable grace and his unending forgiveness, we can't help but live different lives. Oh, not perfect – none of us can do that, but people who live in the light of God's grace and by the strength and power of his love.

It is a good image to remember as we get up each morning to the light of God's new day. It is good to remember that it is God's clothes that we wear; work clothes for a New Year and for our everyday so that we can be about the business of loving and forgiving and serving in this world God gives us. You and I stand naked before God. We aren't capable of clothing ourselves in the beauty God calls us to nor in the sturdiness the world's challenges require of us. But God's clothes are – his love, his grace, his salvation. And as we wear them, we witness to the world of this God who cares enough for his people to clothe us.

AMEN.

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