

January 1, 2012

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Revelation 7:9-17

ALL DECKED OUT FOR THE NEW YEAR

If an alien from outer space had happened to descend upon our planet last Sunday and had quietly made its way to the windows of our family and living rooms and watched what we did around our Christmas trees, one of the things that the alien might surmise is that Christmas Day is when certain people of a Christian persuasion take the time to re-clothe each other. For it is on Christmas Day that this alien would see that we hand each other boxes most of which contain articles of clothing that we hope and expect others to wear. We exchange the boxes, we tear the wrapping, we open the lids and we usually offer one of two responses; either “OOOOOO!” or “OOOOHHHHH!”. Despite these responses the alien would likely deduce that these Christians are very concerned about dressing each other. Of course, the alien might also grow a little confused if he followed us the next several days and watched as we took these clothes we received back to the places where our friends and family got them in order to pick out something else or to get our money back or get a store credit. If the alien had watched the whole exercise from beginning to end he might really be perplexed: “Let’s see, these Christians around November and December, they go to stores to get clothing to re-clothe their friends and family, they give it to their friends and family who try it on and wear it for about three minutes

and then put it back in the box and the next day when nobody is looking they take it back to the place from which it came. A very strange ritual indeed.”

Of course it doesn't always happen that way. Some of us get lucky and either give the right article of clothing or receive it. The right color, the right size, the right style. I am guessing that a certain percentage of us are, in fact, today wearing something that we received for Christmas.

It all goes to show though that clothing is very important to us. It has been that way since the fall of Adam and Eve. Before the fall of humankind clothes weren't important at all. No thought was given to the issues of apparel. (Of course the Garden of Eden was likely in a very warm climate.) But it was out of the shame and embarrassment of knowing too much – having eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – that Adam and Eve begin worrying about clothing. And clothing has been a big thing ever since. It becomes a statement. It says who we are. It is a way to achieve success. “Clothes define the person,” our friends on Madison Avenue might say. And so we walk through the mall and there we have it -- store after store after store of clothes. More apparel than we could ever want or need. We buy it, we wear it on average for a very short time – usually until we grow tired of it or it goes out of style – and then we either throw it away or we give it to the poor who aren't so picky.

Now one thing clothes do for us is make us self-conscious. They call not just other people's attention to us but they call our attention to us. If you don't think clothes make you self-conscious just try going to be a party underdressed. Or drop a big glob of ketchup on your white shirt or blouse. Or put on two different color socks by mistake. And now all of a sudden your clothes have become a burden. They are an indication of your inadequacy.

Interesting, isn't it, that we hear so little about Jesus' clothing. In his hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of appearances in the Gospels no one takes time to mention what he's wearing. No comments on what color or style Jesus chose. Think about it, the only six significant mentions of Jesus' clothing were, 1.) the swaddling cloths with which his mother Mary wrapped him, 2.) the hem of his robe which the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years touched and was healed, 3.) the dazzling white robe of his transfiguration, 4.) the purple robe by which he was mocked by Roman guards, 5.) the tunic that they stripped from his body and gambled for, and 6.) the linen wrappings he left behind upon his resurrection. Someday I am going to preach a sermon on Jesus' wardrobe ... but not today. Suffice it though to say that the clothing of Jesus was significant only as much as it pointed to the glory of God or the cruelty of man.

So at best the clothing of our lives is a mixed-bag -- symbolic but also problematic.

And yet there is from a Biblical point of view a particular item of clothing that the Bible and its writers seem very concerned about. What Scripture seems most concerned about from a wardrobe point of view is what you're wearing at the end of it all. Nowhere is there more attention paid to apparel than when in the book of Revelation John has a vision of the heavenly kingdom and the heavenly community. And it seems that for heaven there is a dress code. There is an expectation of what you are going to wear. In fact it is what you are wearing that gets you into heaven in the first place.

Now that might seem sort of strange, because heaven is the sort of place where we imagine God not worrying about what we wear -- that God looks not on the outward appearance but upon the heart. But it turns out that in heaven it is by virtue of God's grace that we are outfitted. You see there is 1 clothes' designer in heaven and it's God. And there is one clothes design in heaven, and it is grace.

John looks upon the heavenly community and wonders why they are all robed in white and the elder replies, "They have all washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

You see at the end of it all there is really only one outfit that we have to be concerned about and it's the outfit of grace. Being clothed in the forgiveness of God. Being dressed in the righteousness of Christ.

Now if that isn't good news enough, the other good news is that this outfit of grace is not something we must wait for until the end. This garment of grace is something we get to try on now. In fact, I can't think of a better time to try it on than on the first day of a New Year. Today is the day, isn't it, when we get to start again. We have left behind another year and we have perhaps paused to make some resolutions for the year ahead, three of which we've broken already. But it is true that New Year's Day gives us a mark in time to begin again. To settle accounts and zero out, and wipe the slate clean and give it another try and hope that next year will be better, or at least the same, as last year. So maybe it's a good time to consider trying on this new garment of grace.

But instead of going about this "grace thing" like we do the "New Year thing;" that is, turning over a new leaf only to turn it back over again a week later. What if we took on this garment of grace differently? What if today we took on this frock of forgiveness very intentionally, not as a concept, but almost as if we were letting God literally dress us?

Isaiah writes: “He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.” You and I are given the opportunity to allow God every day to clothe us with salvation and robe us with Christ’s righteousness.

You see today we are being offered the chance not just to start over, but we are given the chance to be freed of every piece of clothing of the past, every bit of sin the clings, every bit of baggage the weighs heavy and take on a whole new outfit -- a brand new garment washed in the blood of Jesus’ forgiveness. We really do get to put the past behind.

But now is not the only day. You see tomorrow morning when we wake up we are going to lie in bed for a moment. And we are going to think about what day it is, what things we have to do and what clothes we need to wear. But what if before we put either foot on the floor, what if we took the moment every day and said to ourselves and to God in a little prayer: “God, I permit you this morning to clothe my with the garments of salvation, to cover me with the robe of righteousness.” In other words, “God, I am yours today. I let you claim me. I let you forgive me. I let you become my identity. I allow the garment of grace to shape me. That whatever happens today (or I fear will happen) is inconsequential compared to the garment I am letting you put on my back.” Is that something in this New Year we can let happen every morning?

You've heard me before speak of *St. Patrick's Breastplate*, that ancient Celtic prayer.

And I love it for lots of reasons, not the least of which is that it begins with three words: *I rise today*. It is the perfect morning prayer.

I rise today:

In the power of Christ's birth and baptism,

In the power of his crucifixion and burial,

In the power of his rising and ascending,

In the power of his descending and judging.

I rise today:

With the power of God to pilot me,

God's strength to sustain me.

God's wisdom to guide me.

God's eye to look ahead for me,

God's ear to hear me,

God's word to speak for me,

God's hand to protect me,

God's way before me,

God's shield to defend me,

God's host to deliver me.

I rise today!

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me;

Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me;

Christ to the right of me, Christ to the left of me;

Christ in my lying, Christ in my sitting, Christ in my rising

I rise today!

You see, my friends, God forgives us not just at the end of life but at the beginning of every day. And every morning we rise with this question: “How will I choose to clothe myself today? Will it only be with what I have hanging in my closet? Or will it be the garment that God has holding for me?” It is, I guarantee you, the most important decision you will make not just in this New Year, but in every new day. “What, by God’s grace, will I put on?”

“And who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” asked the apostle.

“These are they,” said the elder, “who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

“For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.”