



THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Light of the Valley Lutheran Church

New Clothes for Christmas

Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11 (NIV84)

¹ The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD 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, ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, ³ and 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.

¹⁰ I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹ For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

I was walking through a department store the other day and saw a suit for a little boy. I immediately wondered what my boys would be wearing this Christmas because my wife always dresses them up especially nice for those big holidays like Christmas and Easter.

Have you picked out your Christmas outfit yet? Did you buy something new? Is there something that you save to wear only on Christmas? Personally, I will wear the same suit, but I tend to pick a special Christmas themed tie.

And that gets me thinking about what we wear to church. If we opened up this for discussion, we would hear lots of different opinions. You would have people who advocate wearing your absolute best to church, the finest you can afford. For men, that's probably a suit, tie, button up shirt, etc. Women, you have a lot more variety in how to look nice, but whether it would be a special dress or blouse or jewelry or skirt or heels or whatever, when you see the whole ensemble, you know you look nice. Others would advocate more of a dress casual approach. Pull out the khakis, the polos, the button up shirts without ties, but no suit coats, and, women, you get to wear whatever it is that women wear that you consider dress casual. (Women's fashion expert is not a part of my calling, sorry.) Then there would be more people yet who would say, "Let 'em be comfortable. Come as you are. T-shirt, jeans, it's all good." At the end of the day, the church dress code topic is not settled on how we view each other externally; it's settled by how God views us inside and out.

God's view of us is penetrating. He sees so much more than the clothes we are wearing. Like I talked about last week, here again in Isaiah we have that days of future past preaching. God is looking to a future state of being of his people as being their current state – how they look after he punishes them by the nation of Babylon. As he looked at his people, the Jews, in this upcoming future, this is what he saw: he saw people poor in spirit, brokenhearted. For those who didn't believe God's message and didn't think God would have the guts to actually punish them, they were reduced to poverty. To the believers who had remained faithful even while so many other of their kinfolk rebelled, they had their hearts broken by this punishment that they didn't deserve.

The Lord saw people who were captive, literally. The Babylonians had captured the Jews and ripped them from their homeland. They were also prisoners of these dark times when unbelief among God's chosen people, the Jews, ran rampant and so many strayed from his path.

The Lord saw his people mourning. Outwardly, others would have seen it as well. They would have seen people wearing itchy material called sackcloth, a very traditional choice to show mourning. They wore it knowing that they didn't deserve to be in comfort, that they deserved this pain because of what had happened to them. They would throw dust on their heads or sit in a pile of dust to symbolize the reality that they will return to dust when they die – a death they deserved because of their sins, their wrongdoings. For dust you are and to dust you will return.

But there was more to the outward mourning. God saw what the people were really wearing underneath all those outward signs of grief; it was a broken heart. They had been relying on God's promises for so long - that the Anointed One, the Messiah, would come and destroy the devil's work, to conquer death, to come through the line of King David, to take up that throne and reign forever and ever. But now the king was gone. He's been removed from power. They've lost Jerusalem, their capital. How can God ever fulfill his promise after this? They mourned the loss of their anointed, chosen Savior.

Just as the Lord was able to look at the Jews and see past the externals to see what was going on internally with them, so God does with us. Sometimes we try to cover up what is going on in our lives. We think that I am not exposed and no one can see through what I'm wearing. We try to hide the pain and the hurt and the grief. We don't want people to look at us and see that we are brokenhearted or poor in spirit. As we try to cover it up, on the inside we wear the theme "Blue Christmas." It's blue because we are sad, depressed. We are in a funk and can't get out of it. Any number of things get us blue, get us depressed, despairing – especially the remembrance of a loved one who is no longer with us. People who aren't wearing "Blue Christmas" in December want us to get out of our funk, to recolor our blues to something happy. They pretty much just want us to get over it. And because so many people want us just to be happy and we don't want us to bring them down, we put on the show. We get all dressed up for church or for Christmas and think no one really sees us, no one really knows how sad and depressed I really am. No one sees the pain. And because we are hiding ourselves, we feel trapped, imprisoned to our grief because no one wants to hear how sad this time of the year is for me.

You can try to cover up your mourning and your grief and your despair by wearing nice clothes and putting on a smile, but God sees right through it all. He sees what is really going on with you. You are totally exposed before him. Before you panic at that fact because it is extremely uncomfortable to be exposed and to be unable to hide what we are feeling, God says to you, "I have something else for you to wear. This is the year of my favor, and I am getting you some new clothes – not to cover you up and hide these things, but to give you something to wear that actually deals with your grief, your depression, your sadness. Here's my Anointed, my Son. He's going to tailor a new set of clothes for you this Christmas."

As Isaiah proclaimed, the Anointed One was commissioned, "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." (verse 3) This beautiful new set of clothing would replace the pain and grief and mourning and despair for the Jews. They had lost their homeland, lost the place and the person by whom God said that he would fulfill his promises. Yet God offered them the same salvation he always had. The Anointed One is still coming as promised. So, take off your clothes of grief, despair, and mourning. "For [the Lord] has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness." (verse 10) God puts righteousness on them so that they would be clothed in the solid hope that death will not reign forever, but will be replaced with life for those who believe in the Anointed One.

The Lord decks us out in that same new set of clothing for Christmas. You may be trying to hide that you are sad, depressed, mourning, but the Lord gives you a garment of salvation. His Anointed One, Jesus, has taken away your sin. You are saved. You will go to heaven where you will never again experience grief, despair, mourning, sadness, or depression. He brushes the ashes of death from your head and gives you a crown of beauty, a crown of eternal life, a crown indicating that you belong to his royal family of the King who conquers death. Instead of mourning, he gives you the oil of gladness, that because of Jesus Christ, the Anointed One, you always have the assurance each and every day that he has paid for your sins and defeated death. Instead of a spirit of despair, the Anointed One gives you a garment of praise because he has made righteousness sprout in your life, that you are right with God right now. Because he has made you righteous, you have an everlasting and certain hope that your future will be clothed with the happiest and most joy-filled days yet to come.

The Lord sees you exactly as you are. He sees how you are hurting. He sees your grief and your despair, and he says, "I have that covered. Even though you can't hide this from me, from everyone, I will take away this mourning and sadness and depression by the work of my Anointed. Take this new set of clothing. Here are your robes of righteousness. I have paid for them myself with my life and my blood. I want you to have them. Wear these from now on, and they will never get old or dirty or worn out because my righteousness endures forever." The Lord has given us a whole new set of clothes, and he wants us to wear them this Christmas season and always.

With the clothes we wear to worship, it's more important to wear what God has given us over any brand or style. We don't put on a show for him or other people, but rather he wants us to enjoy the new set of clothes that he has given us.

Put on this new set of clothes. We put on the robe of righteousness as we come here and rejoice in the wonderful gift of the Anointed One, the gift of Jesus Christ coming to us not just on Christmas, but a gift that is in our lives every day. Every time that we read about him, hear about him, talk about him, think about him, share him with others, we are putting on these robes of righteousness, these garments of praise.

This new set of clothes is God's Christmas gift to us, coming straight from the Anointed One, Jesus Christ. Display the splendor of the Lord. Wear the garment of salvation and robes of righteousness proudly. Wear them daily for God has dressed you in the best set of Christmas clothes ever. Amen.