

Dress Your Best

In the name of Him who is the Light to the Gentiles and the Glory of His people, Israel; dear friends in Christ: I'm sure you've been there, standing in front of a closet full of clothes and asking yourself the question, "What should I wear?" As you mull over the options, you're taking several factors into consideration. Will I be too hot or too cold wearing this? Will I be comfortable? Is this too formal or too casual? Will I be dressed appropriately for the occasion? If you're like me, you're probably also wondering if this or that still fits. (Sad to say that with increasing frequency the answer is no.) But perhaps the biggest question is does this look all right on me? Especially if you're heading out for a special event or celebration, you want to dress your best.

Some people have a knack for this. They are always well dressed and stylish. Others not so much. I recall when my daughters were still in the house they'd watch these makeover programs on TV. Friends and relatives of a woman known for her perpetually sloppy attire and careless attitude toward her appearance would write the show nominating a subject. "You've got to help poor Mildred. All her clothes are hideous and they make her look like a shapeless sack." Then the stars and staff of the program would descend upon the victim. They'd go through her closets and throw just about everything away. Then they'd take her shopping, finding items that actually looked good on her – items that she would never have thought to buy for herself. Professional hair stylists and makeup artists would complete the transformation. And then they'd show you the before and after pictures. The difference was amazing. Suddenly Plain Jane is drop dead gorgeous. And the thing was they didn't really change the person at all. They only helped her to look her best.

And by now you're probably wondering where I'm going with this. I won't leave you in suspense. It just so happens that this morning's reading from Isaiah speaks of a transformation of appearance very much like the one I just described. The difference is that subject is you. You're the one who in a spiritual and moral sense has proven to be utterly incompetent when it comes to dressing your best.

It's true of every one of us. At the core of our beings we are sinners who are naked and ashamed. We dare not reveal our true selves to anyone. To a certain extent we even hide who we are inside and at heart from ourselves. And so, like our first parents we try to cover up. To cover pride we put on false humility. To cover selfishness we apply false interest in the welfare of others. To cover greed we put on false generosity. To cover the lies we've told, we have to tell more lies; and so on. Such "clothes" are mere fig leaves. They do cover the worst of the shame, but they also reveal that we're trying to hide something. And like fig leaves they aren't comfortable, they don't quite fit, and they certainly don't last. From time to time you may go out of your way to do something really impressive to convince yourself and others that you truly are good at heart, but the Lord sees that too. To him your imagined righteous deeds appear as filthy rags. No, left to yourself, you do a very poor job of dressing up. Let's call it major wardrobe malfunction.

Fortunately for you, the one doing your makeover is the Lord God. And the approach he takes is pretty radical. He begins by stripping off the fig leaves you've put on. He accomplishes this by his holy Law that reveals the truth of your sinful condition. He makes you ashamed of yourself. It's not a pleasant ordeal. It's not at all comfortable. But it needs to be done. It's a

necessary part of your transformation. And since he can't have you running around naked in public, he provides the clothing of repentance. We saw this throughout the season of Advent. It was portrayed in the scratchy camel hair coat and leather britches of John the Baptizer. His rough, uncomfortable clothes were a picture of a troubled and penitent spirit. Elsewhere in Scripture people brought by the Lord to repentance put on sackcloth and ashes. It's an expression of sorrow and grief for sin. So the Lord must have you also put on the clothes of repentance as a necessary first step.

But we're out of Advent now. Today we're in the joyous season of Christmas. We're celebrating the Savior's birth. And we recall that the Son of God became our brother in flesh to bear our sin and shame. Thus he appeared himself in the clothes of repentance: a baby wrapped in old rags. In last week's message I spoke of how his swaddling cloths pointed ahead to the grave clothes they would put on his naked corpse when after his shameful crucifixion they buried him in the tomb.

And in this we see a portrait of the great exchange. Christ appears wrapped in rags so that the Lord can clothe you as Isaiah describes in today's text "in the garments of salvation" and "the robe of righteousness". This is Christ's righteousness applied directly to you. This is the righteousness that is imputed to you by faith as you trust in him. The result is that having put on Christ, that's what the Heavenly Father sees when he looks at you: not your sin and naked shame, but the sinless perfection and loving obedience of his only-begotten Son. You can't be more dressed up than that. In Christ you are dressed to the max for every occasion. Your makeover is complete. And the difference is absolutely stunning – as the prophet says "as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

By faith in Christ your Savior that's how the Lord sees you. And that's great news. It's the heart of the Gospel. But let's not stop there. Isaiah goes on to say that this righteousness with which you've been clothed goes forth as brightness, like a burning torch in the darkness. He says the nations shall see your righteousness. He also says the Lord is giving you a new name. That name is *Christian*. It means "little Christ". The point is that having put on Christ in Baptism and by faith it's not only the Lord who sees Christ when he looks at you, it should be everyone else too. When others look at you they ought to see Jesus: his love, his compassion, his patience, his kindness, his forgiveness, his gentleness, his care and concern. They must see it because if you've put on Christ, it's there.

And hopefully you're thinking, "But wait a minute. In the makeover described earlier, the person wasn't changed. She was only helped to dress her best. It seems to me that something similar is going with what you're telling me now. I'm still a sinner inside, naked and ashamed. That hasn't changed. Sure, by faith I've put on Christ, but if that's who people see, doesn't that make me a hypocrite, simply pretending to be someone I'm not?"

Yes and no. Yes in the sense that if you're only pretending to be Christ-like, then what you're really doing is putting on fig leaves and filthy rags. Don't do that. And yes also in the sense that the word hypocrite means "behind a mask". If people see Christ when they look at you, it's because it's actually *him* that they are seeing. The visible righteousness is his, not yours. But the answer to the question is no if you take the necessary steps we went through earlier. Just as you must get dressed each day, so also you must put on Christ anew. That means first looking at yourself in the mirror of God's Holy Law. You've got a catechism. Open it up and look at the Ten Commandments. For a closer look, go to the explanation section in the back of the catechism where everything is put forth in more detail. You might also look over the

Table of Duties that tells what God requires of you in each of your vocations. Let the Law of God strip off the fig leaves that you put on the day before. Let it reveal and remove the filthy rags of self-righteousness. It's not pleasant or comfortable, but allow the Lord to clothe you in the sackcloth and ashes of repentance. Then and only then will you be ready to receive again the robe of Christ's righteousness by faith in his saving work for you. And because it's the real thing, it is what people will see.

Today we are closing out the old year, and tonight at midnight we will open a new. Now that you know how, I exhort you to resolve to dress your best each and every day in 2018, for by so doing you will be a crown of beauty in the Lord's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!