



Salvation Clothes

John 1:6-8, 19-28 & Isaiah 61:1-4

A sermon by William M. Klein

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1 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to 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** to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. **4** They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. (Is. 61:1-4 NRSV)

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. **7** He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. **8** He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light... **19** This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" **20** He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." **21** And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." **22** Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" **23** He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' " as the prophet Isaiah said. **24** Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. **25** They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" **26** John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, **27** the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." **28** This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. (Jn. 1:6-8, 19-28 NRSV)

1

A saint of this church once chided me at a Session meeting for what he believed was an excessively long sermon title. When I and the rest of the members of Session looked at him with confused expressions, he explained: "The other day I was driving down the street and tried to read your sermon title on the marquee. The title was so long I ran into the car stopped ahead of me." When he chuckled we all realized he was not seriously rebuking me...but since that time I have sought to supply briefer sermon titles.

I wonder what folks thought if they read the sermon title for this morning on the marquee? "Salvation clothes." I wonder if anyone thought we were advertizing a new line of religious apparel? Perhaps a seasonal "John the Baptist" line – camel's hair shirts, leather girdles, barefoot shoes,¹ hats for those who fear they may lose their heads.

Searching the internet I came across – "Your online Christian Superstore for people headed to heaven." What a pleasant surprise to log-on and find items that will prepare me perfectly for the next life: checkbook covers, golf accessories, handbags, action figures, neck-ties. Apparently I am too late. Salvation clothing already exists.

You and I can log-on, click a few buttons, supply a PayPal account number, and have salvation apparel shipped to our door. It is a prospect far simpler than having a crazed-looking prophet point out our sinfulness...and certainly a lot easier than allowing a wild man to nearly drown us in the chilly and cold waters of the Jordan River.

2

“Salvation clothes.” Makes you think, doesn’t it? There are clothes for every occasion. Are there salvation clothes, too?

John the Baptizer’s wardrobe always gets my attention. But salvation clothes also come to mind if we spent time with the passage from Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah said the spirit of the Lord God had come upon him...that the Lord had anointed him to deliver good news to the poor, the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the prisoners, and them that mourn. And then Isaiah talked about the clothing we would need in order to join God in his salvation work. At God’s behest, the prophet was to give them “garlands instead of ashes, oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

One translation I came across said it like this: God wanted Isaiah to give these people “a turban instead of ashes, festive ointment instead of mourning, a garment of splendor instead of a drooping spirit.”² Salvation clothes? Sounds like it.

Isaiah, after all, was not just a prophet. He was also a rough-hewn poet. He certainly used poetic imagery to bid his fellow Exiles to believe God was about to act on their behalf. He likened what God was about to do to a “clothing makeover.” God was going to lead his people from the Babylonian Exile back to Jerusalem...and it would feel like being clothed by God in new outfits, jewelry, and precious ointments.³

As Isaiah pointed out earlier...the Lord of Hosts would bring this to pass.⁴ The people were not going to be in control of their wardrobe change. It was going to be God’s doing because God’s idea of re-clothing was (and always is) far more radical than anything they could imagine, much less pull off left to their own devices.

3

In his third Narnian Chronicle, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, C. S. Lewis tells us of Eustace Scrubb. As the story progresses, Eustace and the other children find themselves marooned on an unknown island. Unaccustomed to helping anyone but himself, Eustace creeps off to take his ease while the others set to work. He manages to get thoroughly lost and ends up in the valley of a dragon. The dragon is scarcely a cause of alarm, though, for Eustace comes upon it in time to watch it expire. Then the real adventure begins.

A torrential rain begins to fall and Eustace seeks shelter in the dragon’s cave – and there, once his eyes adjust to the dark, he realizes he is sitting on an enormous heap of crowns, rings, gold, and precious jewels. Being greedy, he slips a gold bracelet upon his arm – but no sooner had he done this than a heavy sleep fell upon him. He fell asleep on the treasure heap, and when he awoke, he discovered to his utter horror he had turned into a dragon.

When the magnitude of what had happened sank in, an appalling loneliness came over him. Eager to be changed, he meets Aslan, the great lion – the Christ figure in the tale. Aslan led Eustace to a mountaintop garden, in whose center lay a wide well of pure, clear water. Eustace longed to bathe in it, but Aslan commanded him to first undress.

2

Eustace succeeded in tearing off his outer skin and scales. But when he approached the water, his reflection still revealed a dragon skin. Twice more he scratched off his rough and wrinkled suit – and twice again found himself yet encased in the vestment of a beast. Then Aslan spoke, “You will have to let me undress you,” he said. Eustace describes what happened then.

“The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right to my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff come off. Well, he peeled it right off – just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times, only then it hadn’t hurt – and there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch. Then he caught hold of me. I was very tender underneath now that I had no skin on – and he threw me into the water. It smarted like anything, but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and...I found all the pain had gone. And then I saw why. I’d been turned into a boy again... After a bit, the lion took me out and dressed me.”⁵

C. S. Lewis knew God must re-clothe us because we have no idea how radical the change can be. We lack enough imagination or courage.

4

So, if God was going to be re-clothing Israel, what would their part be? It is useful to know what role they would play in God’s plan because it gives us a clue as to the role we may play, as well.

I hear Isaiah saying two things. The **first** has to do with letting God have his way with them...letting God dress them in a fashion fit for their new estate which meant letting God remove their poverty or grief or shame or slavery clothes.

The **second** thing I hear Isaiah saying has to do with the witness they were to have once God had done all of this. Their part would be to let God lavish his affection upon them...and to wallow in God’s tender care. They were to grow where God planted them...to become oaks of righteousness...to let God’s Spirit work in them until their words and deeds revealed God’s glory. They were to love God and one another as a visible, tangible witness to the extraordinary and unmerited love of God. They were to be known in all the world as God’s people, a different people, a people who actually love and encourage and care for and respect one another.

5

God was faithful to his part of the plan. Did the people play their part? Did they let God love them...and did they take to heart how much God wanted them to love one another? Do we?

In the mid-80s, Robert Bellah and four other researchers produced a book they entitled, Habits of the Heart. Their inquiry quickly became one of the most widely discussed interpretations of American society in the 20th century. The five researchers published an updated edition in the middle 1990s in which they acknowledged their earlier research did not sufficiently anticipate the degree to which American society would become so thoroughly individualistic. When the updated edition was published in ‘96, they wondered if such a “me” centered society could long survive.

According to Bellah, a central consequence of this individualism has to do with our conspicuous lack of obligation for others. He observes that we seem to have convinced

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ourselves that economic success or misfortune is the individual's responsibility – and his or hers alone.⁶ As Bellah states it, “blaming the poor for their poverty rather than recognizing a catastrophic economic and political failure of American society, serves to soothe the conscience of the affluent, and it even allows them to wax indignant at the cost of helping the poor in a time of expanded deficits.”⁷

As we place Isaiah's vision alongside Bellah's research and our own experience, it is hard not to conclude that as a society we have clothed ourselves, layer upon layer, with selfishness and self-deception. The good news is that it is never too late to be claimed by God's gracious love. It is never too late to let God have his way with us.

6

Henri Nouwen (Dutch-born, Catholic priest and writer) once said that when the deepest truth that defines us is that we are loved by God and when our greatest joy and peace come from fully claiming that truth...it follows that this has to become visible and tangible in the ways we eat and drink, talk and love, play and work⁸...and dress.

Did you notice Nouwen used the word “when” – suggesting “if and when” people come to terms with truth...“if and when” people let their minds be consumed with remembrance of God. He believed that if and when we ponder God's love then we become grateful people...which is to say, we become people shaped most of all by God's love. Or, to continue the theme of salvation clothes, we become people God dresses in party clothes – “a turban instead of ashes, festive ointment instead of mourning, a garment of splendor instead of a drooping spirit.”

7

John the Baptist did not talk in terms of wardrobe. But he talked about people being prepared. Like Isaiah, John wanted to prepare the people to be ready for what God was about to do in their midst. John did not talk about God re-clothing the people of Israel...but his appearance spoke volumes about simplification, about traveling light.

John knew he had a role to play in God's salvation work. His role was to announce the coming of the Messiah. He was to be the voice crying in the wilderness – “Make straight the way of the Lord.” He was the herald, the forerunner...and not the Messiah. John did not feel worthy enough to untie the Messiah's sandals.

His job was preparation...helping the people make ready because the Lord was coming. He wanted them to be clothed in righteousness when the Messiah arrived.

Because John did his work well, many within Israel were ready for their very important work. And what was that important work? Being ready to receive the coming Messiah...being ready to see in Jesus the love of God made flesh. Their important work was to let their eyes and ears, hearts and minds be trained to see...to really see. To see so well they would not simply recognize the Messiah...they would know that following meant being re-clothed in their rightful minds and outfitted for abundant living.

With Christmas two weeks away, are you being made ready? Are you and I allowing God to re-clothe us for the work he has in mind?

When you get up from your seats and put on your coats, pull on your salvation clothes, too – those clothes God is giving you for the work ahead. Rejoice that God wants you...even the likes of you and me...to bear witness to his greatest gift – the gift of his Son, our Lord – the gift by which God is re-clothing all of creation. Amen.

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Endnotes:

¹ *Merrell* has a line of shoes called “Barefoot shoes.”

² Berlin, Adele & Brettler, Marc Z. ed. 2004. The Jewish Study Bible. NY: Oxford University Press, 904.

³ Bartlett, David L. & Taylor, Barbara Brown, ed. 2008. Feasting on the Word. Year B, Vol. 1. Louisville: WJK Press, 55.

⁴ See Isaiah 9:7.

⁵ Thompson, Marjorie J. 1991. “A Dragon’s Tale.” *Weavings*, Vol. VI, No. 2, March/April. Nashville, TN: The Upper Room Pub., 26-30.

⁶ Bellah, Robert N. et. al. 1996. Habits of the Heart, updated edition. LA: University of California Press, vii.

⁷ Bellah, xv.

⁸ Nouwen, Henri J. M. 1992. Life of the Beloved. NY: Crossroad Pub., 47.