New Clothes!

Isaiah 61:10-62:5

2 Corinthians 5:2-5

12/28/14

Thought for Meditation:

 When I lose my car keys or my wife loses a contact lens, “operation recover” immediately goes into effect. I have taken apart traps in bathroom sink drains, returned to restaurants, and even dismantled our living room furniture.

 On the other hand, when I lose a blue sock deserving retirement anyway, I don’t fret until I find it. The value of lost items determines the intensity of my search-and-rescue efforts.

*Steven D. Mathewson, Quoted in Leadership Journal, Spring 2000, p97.*

How much do we value our family, friends and neighbors who are “lost,” who don’t know Jesus Christ? How much do we value God’s love, and the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ?

 One morning a teenage boy walked into his dad’s bedroom and asked if he could borrow some of his clothes to wear to school. Dad puffed out his chest a little bit, and thought, “Finally. My son’s going to have a little class when he goes to school. He wants to look better than his usual jeans and t-shirt.” He said to his son, “Sure. What’s the occasion?” His son replied, “Today is the day everyone is supposed to dress up as a nerd!”

 How many of you received clothes for Christmas? I’m not talking socks or underwear. I’m talking about something you can show off. Is anyone wearing your new clothes? (**Ask / Explain)**. *This sweater is one my Mom made for me a couple of years ago for Christmas. I also got this wonderful new shirt and tie.*

Let’s be honest. We know that clothes don’t define a person. A wonderful person might be wearing rags and someone with a great wardrobe might be a terrible person. However, what you wear has an impact on your attitude and your emotions. There is something about dressing up, especially with new clothes, that makes you feel good about yourself. You stand up a little straighter and feel a little better. What I would like to suggest this morning is that there is a biblical basis for having a positive attitude about new clothes. Let’s look at what the Bible says about this.

Throughout the New Testament salvation is sometimes associated with new clothes. In Mark 5 there is a story of the man who was possessed by a legion of demons. He terrified the people of the area. He ran around naked and lived out among the tombs. Jesus came to him and healed him. When the people came out to see what happened Mark tells us that this man was wearing clothes.

In Galatians 3 Paul says that those who are baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. In the early church, when a person was baptized, he or she was given new clothes, a brand new white robe to symbolize their salvation.

In Revelation 3 Jesus challenges the church in Laodicea. That was the church that was neither hot nor cold. They were lukewarm and Jesus wanted to spit them out of his mouth. In his words to the church he invited them to get from him “white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness” (Revelation 3:18b).

In our passage from 2 Corinthians Paul talks about the longing that is part of all of our lives, the longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling. We don’t want to be found naked. Instead we long to be clothed with the salvation that comes from Christ.

These ideas about new clothes have their roots in the Old Testament. Think back to Genesis 3, the story of the first sin. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and one of the things they realize is that they are naked. In their shame they hide from God. God finds them and there are consequences for their sin. But notice what happens at the end of the story. “The Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” (Genesis 3:21) In an act of grace God gave them new clothes.

The prophet Zechariah had a vision. In this vision Joshua, the high priest, was standing before an angel of the Lord. Satan is there accusing Joshua. Listen to what happens. “Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ Then he said to Joshua, , ‘See, I have taken your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.’” (Zechariah 3:3-4). Then they put new clothes on Joshua as a sign of God’s grace.

The metaphor of salvation being described in terms of new clothes is best seen in our passage from Isaiah. Isaiah rejoices in the Lord, and then he says why. “God has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he arrayed me in a robe of righteousness” (Isaiah 61:10). Isaiah is very clear that God is the source of his salvation. Look at verse 11. “…the Lord God will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations” (Isaiah 61:11). Isaiah didn’t make the clothes for himself. He didn’t earn the money to buy them. They are a gift from God. God has given us new clothes. God is the source of our salvation. As Christians, we believe that salvation has come in the person of Jesus Christ. In and through Jesus God has clothed us with salvation and righteousness.

There are at least two consequences that follow. First, we are called to rejoice. We are called to join Isaiah in saying “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God.” (Isaiah 61:10) I love the way it’s worded in The Message: “I will sing for joy in God, explode in praise from deep in my soul!” Because we have been clothed with salvation in Jesus Christ, we are called to overflow with joy.

Karl Barth is considered to be one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century. He had a brilliant mind and wrote massive amounts of books. His writings are complex and often difficult to understand. Yet underneath it there is a joy and playfulness in Barth’s life and in his writings. He once said, “The theologian who has no joy in his work is not a theologian at all. Sulky faces, morose thoughts and boring ways of speaking are intolerable in this science.”

Barth lived in Basel, Switzerland. One day he was riding a bus in the city and a man got on the bus and sat next to Barth. He was obviously a tourist. Barth struck up a conversation with him. “You’re a visitor here, aren’t you? What do you want to see in our city?” The man replied, “I would like to see the great theologian, Karl Barth. Do you know him?” Barth said, “Oh, yes. I shave him every morning.” The man got off the bus, satisfied that he had met Barth’s barber.

Have you ever noticed how many Christmas songs have to do with joy? ***(Name That Tune)*** “**Joy** to the world, the Lord is come.” “O come all ye faithful, **joyful** and triumphant.” “Hark the herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn King. Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!’ **Joyful** all ye nations rise…” “Good Christian friends **rejoice** with heart, and soul, and voice;” The music is joyful and uplifting, because Christmas is a time for joy. The joy is part of the message that the angels first brought to the shepherds. “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great **joy** for all the people, to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10)

As I was thinking about Christmas carols and joy, I thought of one other song we usually sing at Christmas time. It is not a Christmas song, but an Advent carol. “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.” The song is in a minor key. It’s dark and somber. It acknowledges that we are captives, that we live in exile. It talks of gloomy clouds of night and death’s dark shadows. But even in the midst of that we are called to “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.” We are to rejoice even in a minor key, even when life is a struggle and our hearts are filled with sadness and pain. We can do that because of Emmanuel. God is with us and through Jesus we have been clothed with righteousness and salvation.

There is a second thought I’d like to lift out of our passage from Isaiah. This passage is one of the lectionary readings for the Sunday after Christmas. I have no idea who picked these verses from Isaiah, but it is an unusual choice. Isaiah 61 and Isaiah 62 are generally considered two separate passages. Whoever put the chapters in the Bible thought there was a natural break after verse 11 of chapter 61. Most commentaries follow the same pattern. However, the first few verses of chapter 62 have a message that fits wonderfully with chapter 61. Not only are we called to rejoice in our salvation. We are also to share our joy and invite others to experience the same joy that comes from having new clothes, from having salvation in Jesus Christ.

Isaiah is thankful for his new clothes of salvation. He rejoices, but he also has a passion to make sure that others know that same salvation and righteousness. “For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch” (Isaiah 62:1). Until the people of Jerusalem, the people of Israel, know the salvation of God, Isaiah will do everything he can to tell them about God’s love and mercy. He dedicates his life to proclaiming the good news.

 This passage was probably written at a time when the Israelites were struggling. The people of Israel thought that God had abandoned them. Their identity was that they were Deserted by God. They were Desolate. Those were their names. I wonder, with all that has gone on here at Sharon in the last couple of years, if anyone ever felt that way about God. “God has forgotten us or rejected us?” If you have ever felt that way you need to hear this good news.

 God has given Israel, and us, new names – Hephzibah which mean My Delight Is in Her, and Beulah which means Married. I love the end of verse 4 “The Lord will take delight in you.” Isn’t that an amazing idea. God delights in you. Just as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, God rejoices over us, and over all the people of the world. Yet the truth is, many people still feel forsaken and desolate. Not everyone knows God’s love. Not everyone knows that God delights in them. Isaiah dedicates his life to telling others the good news of God’s love. We are invited to have the same passion so that all people may know God’s salvation and rejoice in the good news of Jesus Christ.

 Who is it in your life that you have a passion for them to know God’s love and salvation? Maybe it’s your children. Maybe it’s people who have no faith at all, who don’t know anything about Jesus. That might be people in a village in Papua New Guinea. It might also include your next door neighbor. Don’t assume that because people live in Pittsburgh, or anywhere else in the United States, that they know who Jesus is or anything about Christianity. There are thousands of people right here in our community, who know absolutely nothing about Jesus or what it means to be a Christian.

 Let me be blunt here. What I’m talking about is that nasty word – evangelism. We’re Presbyterians. We don’t like evangelism and we’re not very good at it. I’m not going to go into a full explanation of evangelism, but let me offer you three simple ideas about evangelism. First, when you think of someone needs to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, pray for that person. Ask God to open that person’s heart and mind to the message of Jesus. How that person responds is not your responsibility. It is God’s. So pray. Second, tell that person what Jesus means to you and how Jesus has worked in your life. Some people are afraid to do eveangelism because they are afraid they might not have all the answers. You don’t have to know everything, but you can know how Jesus has made a difference in your life. Third, invite that person to church. The church is the body of Christ. What better place to learn about Jesus than right here.

 There was a little girl who was going to be in her first Christmas Pageant. She was so excited about it. After the first rehearsal she told her mom that she got to wear her bathrobe to church and that she had the most important part in the whole story. Mom thought that since she was so young she probably wouldn’t have the role of Mary, so she asked. “What part did you get?” “I’m the Christmas star!” she exclaimed proudly. Mom didn’t want to squelch her enthusiasm, but she didn’t understand why she thought that being the star was so important. “Why do you say that is the main part?” The little girl said “I get to show everybody how to find Jesus.”

 My friends, we are invited to rejoice in the good news of Jesus Christ, to rejoice in our new clothes of salvation. We are also, like the little girl who was the star, to help others find Jesus.