

## ***Wearing the Gift***

Colossians 3:12-17

First Sunday in Christmas

A blessed Christmas to all of you. While the rest of the world has packed up Christmas, in the Church we take a little time to unpack the gift of the Christ child and contemplate what his birth into this world means for us and our lives. It is important to take time to reflect on the meaning of Christmas. And so the season of Christmas lasts for twelve days, right up until the day of Epiphany on January 6.

One of the privileges I have as a pastor is to bring the joy of our savior to the people that the Lord has called me to serve and to help them unwrap the meaning of his birth, ministry, death, and resurrection for their personal lives. I get the opportunity to unwrap this gift with many of you not just on Sunday mornings in the pulpit, but also while studying the Bible with you and while visiting with you in your homes or during events connected with the Church. One of the places that I have the privilege to bring this gift of the birth of the Christ child and the joy he brings is into places where joy seems to be lacking. Particularly I am talking about hospitals and nursing homes. Now, there is the excitement in a hospital, especially at the news of a successful surgery or the birth of a new child. But there is also a lot of sickness, sadness, and sorrow. And so I have the opportunity to bring good news into those places.

I often wear my clerical collar when I visit members who are in places like hospitals and nursing homes. After all, the clerical collar is the pastor's uniform and it is a reminder that what matters most is not who he is, but *what* he speaks. He speaks for God. He is God's representative. He brings the good news of the Gospel. He unwraps the Christmas gift of God's joy for the people he serves. The clerical collar is a helpful reminder of that truth.

It is interesting to note the reactions that I get based upon the clothing I wear. There was one particular front desk attendant at a hospital that would always greet me by saying, "Hello, Father," whenever I walked by. She had made a certain association when she saw the shirt I was wearing. The clothing led her to perceive me a certain way. This was made even more obvious when, one day, I passed by her without wearing my clerical collar and she looked up at me, stared at me as if she thought she might recognize me, but then, said nothing, and just looked back down at the book she was reading. Our clothing, in this case, a uniform like a clerical collar, says something to other people about who we are and who we represent.

I tell you this story about clothing and the perception that others can have based on the clothing we wear, because this is the Apostle Paul's point in the Epistle lesson this morning. He writes to the Christians in the city of Colossae who have received the Christmas gift. Also, like you and I, they have been brought into participation into Christ's death and resurrection through the event of their baptism. Paul says to them at the beginning of chapter 3, "If then you have been raised with Christ" (3:1). A few verses later he says to them, "For you have died with Christ" (3:3). This dying to the old self and rising as

a new self, a new creation, happens through the water and the Word of God in Christian baptism. Paul concludes that if they have received the joy of what Christmas is all about through their baptism, then they should be wearing the gift. What they are “putting on” should reflect who they are. Others should be able to perceive that they are baptized, repentant Christians by what they are wearing.

You see, Paul knew that there is a temptation, all the time, for the Christian, for you and me, to put on a different kind of clothing. And this clothing, when it is put on, gives the world around us a different perception of who we are that is not actually who God recreated us to be in Christ. The world recognizes this kind of clothing, because it has been wearing out the garments in this wardrobe for ages. It is a wardrobe that gets passed on through the generations. We see the world putting on the clothes of this wardrobe without even giving it a second thought. Our culture even invests a great deal of time and money into creating special places where you can put on the clothing of sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, and the like. And then our culture justifies wearing this clothing because, “Hey, everyone else is putting it on, why can’t I?” And we might be tempted to listen to this kind of logic and be persuaded by it. We might be deceived into thinking that it makes no difference what we put on our new self.

Imagine, though, if we were to wear our exercise clothing all the time. Imagine wearing the clothing that you get sweaty, smelly and dirty to the grocery store, to the bank, to the mall, or to visit another person in their home. After a while we would start to be pretty unattractive and unappealing to others. When a person “puts on” and shows off what the Apostle Paul calls the “earthly clothing” of immorality, impurity, and covetousness, it advertises something to others. Like wearing smelly, dirty, and sweaty exercise clothing all the time, our actions, words, and attitude may be unattractive and unappealing. What is more, when we as Christians give into the temptation to wear this kind of clothing, it makes the God that we claim to serve and represent seem pretty unappealing and unattractive.

This is why we need the words of St. Paul that remind us, as they reminded the Christians in Colossae in the first century, that what you put on gives other people around you a perception about who you are. Paul can also say, if you have been raised with Christ, why would you want to put on anything other than that which shows other people that you are *his chosen, holy, beloved child*?

God knows that Christians of all ages would be tempted to put on the clothing that the world has to offer. This is because we are his own and he knows us. He knows that you and I and all Christians are *simultaneously saints and sinners* who are, all-the-time, tempted to “put on the very thing we know we should not be putting on.” This is why God has given us a new wardrobe to go with our new self.

In the season of Christmas we remember the clothing that our God put on—the clothing of human flesh. God, who is clothed in righteousness, justice, peace, and perfection, humiliates himself to put on humanity. And in so doing he undergoes a mission to identify with the fleshly and earthly desires of humanity. He became our sin bearer, to put on the Sin of an entire world and to put it to death, nailing it to a tree. He identified with sinners and the people even called him Beelzebub, the Prince of Demons. What the sinless Son of God put on out of love for the world, gave the world the wrong perception of who he was. And so they gave him a criminal’s death.

But through his death he trampled on the garments of the flesh. He paid a high price so that the world could have new clothes. And not just new clothes, but a new self on which to put the clothes of

compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, peace, and most of all, love. He rose to renew creation. And all those who trust in him through faith and participate in a death and resurrection like his are recreated and are new creations. You and I have a new wardrobe to go with our new self. Out with the old and in with the new.

And so God clothes you through the Spirit that he has breathed upon you. And when we see and believe that God in Christ paid a high price to make this possible, what other response can you have but thanksgiving? And that is where Paul ends in our reading today. He ends with encouragement to “put on” the accessories by receiving gladly the Word of God and by studying and hearing it. It is through this creative Word become flesh that you have been recreated as a new self. And let new songs pour forth from your mouth and heart. For, the source of that song is the song of salvation that the Son of God sang from the cross to redeem you and restore you in the image of your Creator. We have the opportunity then to put on the things of God and give a witness of who we are and who we represent. Amen.