**The Intimacy of Clothing, Church Bulletin Typos, and Donning Our Gay Apparel**

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Location: Virginia Synod

Date: Third Sunday of Advent, Lectionary Year B, December 13, 2020

Sermon Text: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

**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.

**8**For I the Lord love justice,

    I hate robbery and wrongdoing;

I will faithfully give them their recompense,

    and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

**9**Their descendants shall be known among the nations,

    and their offspring among the peoples;

all who see them shall acknowledge

    that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

**10**I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,

    my whole being shall exult in my God;

for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,

    he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,

as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,

    and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

**11**For as the earth brings forth its shoots,

    and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,

so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise

    to spring up before all the nations.

**John 1:6-8, 19-28**

The Gospel according to John, the first chapter.

*Glory to you, O Lord.*

**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.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

*Praise to you, O Christ.*

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer.

*Amen.*

Grace, mercy and peace to you, from God our heavenly parent and the Lord Jesus Christ in communion with the Holy Spirit! I am Pastor Adam Schultz. I serve bivocationally as pastor of Good Shepherd Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lexington and as a spiritual counselor at Project Horizon, a domestic and sexual violence shelter serving Rockbridge County. I was both honored and thrilled to be asked to preach today as part of the Virginia Synod’s 50/40/10 commemorations. As you can tell, I am neither a woman nor a woman of color; I am here representing the ordination of LGBTQIA+ people in committed relationships as pastors.

This Advent, we at Good Shepherd have been examining ways our Advent texts depict the God we are awaiting. In the first week of Advent, we talked about God the Potter, the God who reaches down into the mire, pulls up a handful of muck, carefully sifts through to remove impurities, centers the clay on the wheel, keeps the mud properly wetted, and works to shape a vessel from the inside out, forming vessels into which God pours good news for the world. We are those vessels. Last week we talked about the very familiar image for God as a shepherd who guides, feeds, mends, milks, protects, seeks out the lost, gathers, and even shears the sheep, using the wool and milk they produce to care for the world.

This week, we once again turn to the words from our Isaiah text this morning for our third Advent face of God: “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation, God has covered me with the robe of righteousness.” This morning, we will explore God the Clother or Weaver—the God who weaves, knits, and sows in order to provide for us, God’s own children.

Few things are more intimate than the clothing we wear. Our clothes are closer to our bodies than anything else we own. Moreover, clothing covers the parts of our bodies that we think of as shameful or private, thus preserving modesty and protecting us from embarrassment; clothing keeps us warm, guarding us from winter’s biting winds and sheltering us from summer’s sweltering sun. To be dressed by someone is an act of intimacy. The person being dressed is exposed to the dresser. Only the most trusted individual could be given that task—bridesmaids dressing a bride on her wedding day or any loving parent dressing their young children for the day. Ladies, how many of you have asked someone to zip up your dress? Do you ask just anyone? Most likely not because you are left exposed in some way to that person, and to engage a complete stranger that intimately would be rather uncomfortable and embarrassing, I would think.

In our first lesson this morning, Isaiah talks about God clothing us with the garments of salvation and covering us with the robe of righteousness. For God to clothe us is just as much of an act of intimacy as anyone else clothing us. To be clothed by God, we first have to be striped down to nothing—exposed, vulnerable, without excuse, hiding behind nothing with all the shameful bits out in the open. This brings to mind Adam and Eve in the garden after they had tasted the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil and realized that they were naked. They knew they were exposed to God and, being afraid, hid. God came in search of them, and, although God expelled them from Eden, God put thread to needle and provided clothing for Adam and Eve to replace the fig leaves they had fashioned for themselves. God provided them with grace, even in the midst of punishment. I love this image of God the Seamstress providing for these children of Eden who hid from God because they were naked—exposed, vulnerable. Of course they had always been naked before God, but now for the first time they were aware of it, and they were ashamed. God’s grace in providing them clothing covered their shame.

This is the exact state we are in when we come to God in confession—not reciting off a list of bad things we have done but admitting that we are dead in our sin, exposing our vulnerable, shameful state—stark naked before God. God’s garments of salvation conceal our shameful actions just as God’s needlework concealed Adam and Eve’s shame. Our sinful actions are covered up with God’s robe of righteousness. That’s what Martin Luther is talking about when he says we are simultaneously saints and sinners all the time. We are sinners dressed in the saintly robes of the righteous. We are goats in sheep’s clothing.

In addition to clothing being intimate and personal, clothing is also revealing and self-disclosing. We use our clothing and fashion as self-expression—think of the teenager trying desperately to fit in who wears the exact same brands as everyone else, think of the rebellious nonconformist who wears a counter-cultural style whose anarchist t-shirt is held together with safety pins, think of the goth guy with heavy black eyeliner and an all-black wardrobe meant to be an outward expression of his internal angst, think of the athlete whose closet rarely expands beyond what you would find at the gym or on the field, think of the business woman whose high heels and power suits command a sense of dominance and power, think of the new widow with a black veil covering her face signifying her mourning. You get the point. We use our clothing to represent what’s going on on the inside, and the Bible does not dispute this—think of the sackcloth of the repentant or the robes of the martyrs washed white in the blood of the Lamb. These are outward expressions of an inward state of being. In last week’s Gospel lesson from Mark, we heard about John’s counter-cultural, rugged, and non-conforming fashion sense of camel hair with a leather belt. In this morning’s Gospel lesson, when asked by the Jewish religious leaders if he is the Messiah, he says that he is not, nor is he Elijah or a prophet. He is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness to make straight the way of the Lord. Well, with that camel hair and leather belt, he’s certainly dressed for the wilderness part. He has come to bear witness to the Light of God coming into the world. That is, he has come to point to Jesus, nothing more. And yet, nothing could be more significant.

The Gospel of John does not begin with what we have come to expect from a Christmas nativity pageant. No, in the Gospel of John, there are no “shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night” who hear choirs of angels singing praise over the birth of the Messiah. There are no foreign astronomers who travel long distances just to give gifts and worship. There is no divine birth in a lowly barn to a virginal mother and her bewildered fiancée as told by a heavenly messenger. No. All we have is John, in the wilderness proclaiming a message as wild as the camel hair and leather belt he wears. John is not dressed in the fine silks and stylish embroidery of the elite as might be fitting for the herald of the Ruler of the Universe. Instead, this wildly-dressed eccentric who sounds like a hairy bear of a man with a fondness for leather proclaims the way of the Lord apart from the traditional seats of power. Even John’s attire defies expectations and bears witness to what kind of Savior Jesus actually is—one who did not come simply to overthrow one political power to rule over Israel but rather came to overthrow all the powers that have hold of the world—to heal the infirmed, to preach good news to the poor and oppressed, to restore sight to the blind, to release those in captivity, and to proclaim an eternal life that comes out of his death—a death that defeats death forever. In short, this Ruler of the Universe is about to turn the whole system on its head and defy all earthly expectations.

I once heard this story of a rather hilarious typo found in a church bulletin during the Season of Lent. The church secretary had printed the King James Version of the text from Isaiah 53 that speaks of the suffering servant. The particular passage was supposed to read, “Surely he hath borne our griefs.” Instead, what was printed read, “Surely, he hath borne our briefs.” Briefs instead of griefs. The typo conjures up images of Jesus in “tighty-whities,” and it just makes me laugh.

During this season of Advent when we prepare for Christ’s arrival, I do like to pause and contemplate the meaning of God becoming human. Yes, I know that’s more of a Christmas season thing, but the mystery of the incarnation is too grand, I think, for a 12-day season. In my contemplation, this story of the typo in the church bulletin has yielded several chuckles and some deep theological insight. Here’s the mystery of the incarnation in a nutshell: the Creator and Controller of the entire universe empties himself into human form where he has to wear undergarments because he cannot control his own bladder. To put it another way, because we could not come to God on our own, God came to us, slipping into skin and with it wearing the garments we wear, even diapers and the briefs. This God who has to learn to control his own bowel movements is the same God who led a reluctant prophet named Moses and the Israelites out of Pharaoh’s grasp and through the Red Sea and chose a young, smelly shepherd named David to bring down a giant and be anointed king. That’s one expectation-blowing God!

Today, on this third Sunday of Advent, some congregations trade in our hopeful, peaceful, and solemn blue for a joyous and celebratory pink. We “don our gay apparel,” so to speak, as we light the pink candle on the Advent wreath and focus on joy. We rejoice in the God who dresses us intimately, personally, and expressively in garments of salvation; we celebrate the God who wore our human clothes in order that we might wear robes of righteousness. On this Sunday in Advent, some congregations may dress their altars in rose-colored paraments, and pastors may wear a rose-colored stole as a visual reminder of the joy that we share in the Light of God coming into world. I don’t own a rose stole, but I do have this pink clerical shirt.

For some—especially those who deal with grief (and let’s face it, with the national death toll in the United States well over a quarter million from the coronavirus by now, there are a whole lot of us grieving)—this time of year can seem anything but joyous as the merriment of season goes on all around without the presence of that particular loved one. For those who mourn, this third Sunday in Advent could be a gross disconnection to the experience of grief.

Pink isn’t always an occasion for joy. When I was in middle school or high school, my family went to visit my cousin in Washington DC. The Holocaust Museum had only been open a year or two at that point, and my parents wanted to take us. At the time, part of the experience was that you were given a passport of one of the inmates, and you could experience the Holocaust through their story. On the passport was a little symbol identifying why that person was in the concentration camp. Mine had an inverted pink triangle on it. Nazi concentration camp prisoners had been made to wear clothing marked with a series of triangles and bars identifying why that person had been imprisoned at the camp. Jews wore two yellow triangles forming a Star of David. Political prisoners wore downward-facing red triangles while prisoners of war wore upward-facing red triangles, criminals and convicts wore green triangles, foreign forced laborers and emigrants wore blue triangles, Jehovah’s Witnesses and other small pacifist religious groups wore purple triangles, and people who were deemed asocial or work-averse wore black triangles including the Roma, the mentally ill and mentally disabled, alcoholics, drug addicts, vagrants, conscription resisters, prostitutes and the few lesbians who were sent to concentration camps. The pink triangle on my passport meant that my prisoner was a gay man. Also lumped in with gay men under the pink triangle were bisexual men, trans women, and sexual predators like pedophiles and zoophiles. To a closeted teenaged gay young man, being handed a passport that asked me to look at the holocaust through the lens of this gay man felt violating and exposing. The whole time I wondered if it had been purposeful, if somehow the museum docent had somehow known my secret—like I also had been wearing some kind of pink triangle when I stepped foot into the museum. But enough about my insecure teenaged self. The man on my passport had been arrested for being gay and forced to wear the pink triangle inside Auschwitz concentration camp. Not only was he denied his freedom, forced to work as a slave, and mistreated by guards, within the camp, he and others like him were the targets of harassment and physical (and sometimes sexual) assault from other inmates. Estimates range from 50,000 to 63,000 men who were forced to wear these pink triangles in Nazi concentration camps in the 1930’s and 1940’s. The man on my passport was eventually gassed and burned at Auschwitz, but for the pink triangle wearers who survived the holocaust, liberation from the concentration camp did not equate to freedom; they went from concentration camp to prison. Homosexual acts between men were criminalized in the newly formed East and West Germany and remained that way until 1968 in East Germany and 1969 in West Germany. In the 1970’s, the symbol of the inverted pink triangle was reclaimed and adopted by the slowly growing global gay rights movement as a symbol of protest and no longer a symbol of shame. By the 1990’s, the pink triangle had become a symbol of pride and joy within the LGBTQIA+ community, and it remains a symbol of pride, protest, and remembrance to this day.

A symbol of terror, humiliation, domination, imperial strength over dissidents, torture, and almost certain death was transformed into joy. God has a way of doing that. Think of the cross. That was also a symbol of terror, humiliation, domination, imperial strength over dissidents, torture, and almost certain death, and through Christ’s death and resurrection, the cross has become our joy, such that we dress our sanctuaries in them and wear them around our own necks. In the words of Psalm 30: “You have turned my mourning into dancing, you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.”

So, if you are mourning the death of a loved one, or grieving over the seemingly endless injustices of this world based on race, gender, and/or sexual orientation, or simply long for the sunlight during these all too brief and shortening December days, I would suggest that today is an invitation to lean into joy, not ignoring the pain and struggle that is there but finding the joy through it and despite it. Lean into God’s joy over finding every lost sheep, joy in the knowledge that death has been swallowed up in Christ’s victory over the grave, joy over the anticipation in God coming to us, joy in the assured promise that God has promised to wipe away every tear and dress us as extravagantly as the long-suffering father dressed his prodigal son with the finest robe and his signet ring. So rejoice! Don your gay apparel for God is coming among us to clothe us in robes of salvation! Thanks be to God! Amen.