

“Garlands and Garments”

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Sunday, December 11, 2011

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17; Isaiah 61:1-4, 10-11

It's too early to tell how the pre-Christmas clothing sales will tally up, but safe to say that more than a few of us will find some kind of apparel wrapped up with a bow under our trees. It might be that sweater that caught your eye, a re-gifted slightly-too-colorful shirt you wouldn't be caught dead in. Clothing is very personal.

What's your favorite item of clothing? It might be cozy old workout togs or your fanciest evening wear. It might be a Christmas-red coat or a plain black hat. What you wear has a lot to say about who you are. Or, as Mark Twain put it, adapting an old English proverb: “Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society.”

We judge people by their clothing, as they do us. Social scientists actually study these things. At Princeton, a freshmen seminar focuses for a whole semester on “Clothing and Identity.” In a research study, John Townsend and Gary Levy concluded that women judged the same man more attractive when he was wearing what they saw as higher status clothes.¹ Clothing advertisements home in on this desire to look good in other people's eyes. Deep down, we know that buying that jacket is not going to make us look like the supermodel wearing it, but it's mighty tempting nonetheless.

It's not just that clothing influences how others see us—it can actually change our own self-concept and even our behavior. Perhaps it was always so. Virginia Woolf wrote early in the last century: “There is much to support the view that clothes wear us and not we them...they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking.”

Actors preparing for a role know this. Finding the right shoes or piece of apparel can unlock the key to a character. Teachers know this, too. Wacky hat day is not going to be a normal day at school. The attention and dollars paid by a bride to her wedding gown is a reflection of how very special she hopes to feel on that nuptial day. When Jesus sent his disciples out to be servants to the poor, he instructed them to “take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep” (Mt. 10:9).

So, what are you wearing for Christmas this year?

When Jesus began his ministry, he attended Sabbath services at the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown. He read scripture, as he had done before, but this time was different. He harkened back to the words of the prophet Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 6:18-19).

When he finished reading these verses, he said to the astonished people gathered there in his hometown: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled."

In the later verses of that chapter of Isaiah, the prophet describes how God will clothe the people—people who are enduring great suffering and economic hardship after having returned from four generations of exile in Babylon. They will be given *"a garland instead of ashes; the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit."* Wow! What an image!

Imagine yourself on Christmas morning unwrapping and putting on a "mantle (a cloak) of praise." It would become you. I mean that literally—a mantle of praise would change who you are—it would *become* you.

Isaiah goes on: *"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 jewels."*

Right now, imagine yourself dressed by God—your maker, God, who loves you as a parent loves a child—in the garments of salvation. Picture yourself in a robe of righteousness—of goodness and grace. On just this normal day in your little life, know that God values you and drapes you with garlands and jewels.

Clothing metaphors abound in the New Testament, also. Many scholars don't believe that the letter to the Colossians was written, as it states, by the apostle Paul. Whoever wrote it was quite a poet, though. Listen:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

See how that works? As God has clothed us in the garments of salvation, so we play our part and clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and above all, love. By changing the externals—by behaving in a Christ-like way—we also change our hearts, allowing Christ's peace to rule there.

Picture it. Imagine it.

Put on a coat of compassion.

Slip on a soft sweater of kindness.

Try on some sandals of humility and meekness.

Button up a long robe of patience.

Wrap yourself in the blanket of love.

And, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which you indeed were called in the one body. And be thankful."

ⁱTownsend, John M.; Levy, Gary D. , "Effects of potential partners' costume and physical attractiveness on sexuality and partner selection," Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied, Vol 124(4), Jul 1990, 371-389