

## **“Wardrobe Malfunction or Functional Wardrobe”**

Isaiah 61 Advent III

GSW 12/11/11

### Introduction to Old Testament Lesson – Isaiah 61

For this reading from Isaiah 61, I would like to first mention something of no exegetical importance – you’ll hear a reference in this passage to a bridegroom and bride – some of you may know I’m getting married soon! That is not why I chose to preach on this passage! So, don’t hear that and think it is some sort of gratuitous wedding reference on my part – OK?

So, with that said – a couple of things that ARE important to note:

- This part of the book of Isaiah comes from the time of the return of the Jewish exiles around the early 6<sup>th</sup> century BC – returning from Babylon to Jerusalem (called Zion) with the intention of rebuilding: rebuilding a city, a nation, a people, a religion, even – it is a tall order...but it is a hopeful time.
- The other thing, is that this Isaiah 61 passage has had particular significance in that it reappears in the Gospel of Luke – the opening verses of Isaiah 61 are what Jesus proclaims at the start of his public ministry, saying these words are being fulfilled in him...

So let's talk about clothing for a little while – not a topic that I have any particular amount of expertise on. It's said that 'clothes make the man' – and if that's the case then that is not good news for me. And I'm not fishing for some sort of sympathy compliments here – 'oh Gordon, you look fine – you look nice!' Really, I'm good with my wardrobe, and, due to the help of people in my life who know better than I do, I manage OK. I have fairly basic wardrobe needs and desires, and I'm just fine with that. But that's just the thing, I realize I am a person who both practically and aesthetically doesn't have much of a feel for such things – when you take the step from clothing to fashion, I'm a step short – but I really do appreciate it about others. I mean, hey – I've seen the movie *Devil Wears Prada* – I've watched some episodes of *Project Runway* – I get it! I realize there is an art and intention that fashion brings to life. And when I see it, I appreciate it – even if I do not necessarily find it within my own aspirations or capacities.

You may have a sense yourself of where you fall on that fashion scale – and how important it is to you or not. But here's another thing to think about when it comes to clothing: no matter where you are on that fashion scale, I think that all of us realize that culturally, we attach a lot of significance to clothes. And by that I mean that whether you are a fashion-ista or not, we all make some assumptions and evaluations regarding clothing. I mean part of the whole high school culture is based on how you dress – jocks and preps and partiers and populars and hipsters and counter-culturers – for awhile there was punk, now maybe goth and emo? (I'm a bit out of my league here, but I try to keep

up). How someone is dressed communicates a lot – from that person; and in what you surmise or assume about a person. People have expectations about how to dress for church, or not – for various events, from black-tie to flip-flops. When I say to think of a homeless person or a millionaire; when I say to think of a white person, or black, or Hispanic, or Asian; when I say to think of a Christian or Muslim or Jew; isn't clothing a part of the mental picture? It is for me. Clothes may make the man, or woman, or not – but whether we're often aware of it or not, we do make a lot out of what people wear.

Alright – so let's shift to Isaiah 61 – and let's take some of those clothing thoughts with us as we do. I didn't just uncustomarily start reflecting about clothing this week all on my own – it's one of the images used by the prophet in the Isaiah 61 passage. There are lots of images used here – nature images (oaks & plantings & shoots & gardens) and healing images (binding up & comfort & restoration), and clothing images. There's a hint of it first when the prophet says 'to give a garland instead of ashes...oil instead of mourning'...ashes were literally the clothing of a time of mourning – ashes on your head – but now there is a shift to a garland, a symbol of life and hope. This passage expresses the fundamental shift from a time of judgment and loss to a time of restoration and renewal. And then that clothing image is picked up again in verse 10: 'God has clothed me with the garments of salvation; God has covered me with the robe of righteousness'... (and then there's that whole groom/bride thing!). This is the image to express that shift to life and hope, to restoration and renewal – the whole verse says 'I will greatly rejoice in

God, my whole being will exalt in the Lord...' and then the garments and robes – so, clearly, these images are meant to express a good thing – these are excellent garments, these are fine robes, that the prophet wants us to think of. Does 'robes' get in the way of that for you? Does 'robe' sound to clerical, or choral, or academic, or formal? Or just a bathrobe? Well then – just think of your idea of a great outfit, and plug that into this image if it helps to have it speak to you.

And I trust that the image at its simple best can speak to us. That time I spent to start this sermon reflecting on clothing, I hope makes some sense here... there is this resonance with an image that says a relationship of faithfulness with God is what best suits us – right? – figuratively and literally. There is this playful sense of seeing that when we are right with God is when we are best dressed – as we come to life fit with God's blessing and grace. That's the fashion part, you could say – AND there is the part of the image that connects to what clothing expresses and communicates. The image leads us to consider what the world sees when it sees us as people of faith; and to what we intend to communicate to others as Christians by how we present ourselves. Appearance does matter – right? – in how we express ourselves and how we are perceived.

The clothing image does have in it some playfulness and potential that I hope is helpful – you can see what connections it might make for you. But there is another step to take with this passage, with this image. It's an exegetical step that you have to decide

about this ‘clothing verse’: when it says ‘clothed with the garments of salvation’ and ‘covered with the robe of righteousness’...is that just a repetition, or a distinction? In Hebrew poetry, especially in the psalms, you find duplets all the time with one statement simply being reworded a second time – such as: “declare God’s glory among the nations; God’s marvels among all the peoples’ (Psalm 96) or ‘O Lord you have made me glad; to the Lord I sing for joy’ (Psalm 94). It’s everywhere you look. So in this poetic language of the prophet, you could say that’s all that is going on here: that ‘garments of salvation’ & ‘robe of righteousness’ are just saying the same thing – and that could be OK. But I don’t think so – the garments and robe images obviously tie these two phrases together – but salvation and righteousness are two quite distinct things – and I think there are some fruitful things that emerge when we take a look at them as connected but distinct. And just to let you know where I’m going before we get there – I think it may well be that salvation is something that suits people more easily than righteousness.

For the people of Israel, laying claim to that garment of salvation always seemed to be a given. Their identity WAS as the people saved by God – saved from Egypt; saved to the promised land; saved for...well that’s where it always got tricky – what were they saved for? Salvation always seemed to turn into a sense of superiority or entitlement...or into an amnesia about being saved at all. And that usually meant a path towards unfaithfulness and disobedience. What was seldom part of the picture was righteousness – a sense of salvation leading to following God’s ways. And here the prophet does that in

a very direct way: garments of salvation AND robe of righteousness – it's a matching outfit.

Really, though, this requires us to ask what those things mean...Salvation? Simply and profoundly it means that we need God for life – that the fullness of life is given in God reaching out to us; salvation is the recognition that we depend on God – Isaiah 61 is filled with the energy of God reaching out with life and wholeness...which you notice has no hints of entitlement, and certainly no claim of ownership of God. But what it does have in it is the feeling that one would respond to such a God – to salvation – would respond with...righteousness! Although that too is in need of some definition – since it gets quite easily hijacked as well. Righteousness can become its own attempt at self-satisfied superiority or control or competition – and actually can do great harm when expressed in that way. Where could we find a true sense of righteousness? How about in Isaiah 61! Because you know what the primary word of the prophet is? – the LORD loves justice; God says it: 'I the LORD love justice'. It IS that simple – the saving acts of God call for a righteousness that looks like this: justice! Call that liberal – call that social – call that radical – or just call it biblical. But then do we need to argue about what justice means? I suppose we will, but that seems at least a faithful argument to have... but it really says it right here – salvation and righteousness suited together as the ensemble of justice looks like this, the prophet says: good news to the oppressed – healing to the

brokenhearted – liberty to the captive – the favor and judgment of God – comfort for the grieving. Justice is a stunning look.

But let me just ask one more thing: is this outfit real – or is it just pretend clothes? Is this the kind of the thing of real life, or just a dress-up charade? Because the truth is, this didn't really take shape in the prophet's time in Israel – there was hope for a new beginning, but the reality didn't match the dream. So then as Christians do we say – 'well, you see – it is fulfilled in Jesus! As God with us Jesus uses the words of Isaiah 61 to define his ministry'..? Yes – Amen – but...the church has imperfectly expressed that fulfillment – using salvation as a possession, righteousness as self-congratulation, justice seen with suspicion rather than passion. We have no corner on fulfillment. And this world is deeply in need of fulfillment of these promises.

Part of the ache of Advent and the celebration of Christmas as well is that we still long for the fulfillment spoken by Isaiah and embodied in Jesus to be made complete. And part of the challenge and calling of this season is to have that fulfillment take place in and through us – the Spirit of the LORD upon us still to live out the salvation we have received and the righteousness to which we are called in Jesus Christ. The world is watching how we are dressed, you could say – and the world needs these garments: the salvation, the righteousness, that clothes the world in the ways of God's justice. AMEN.