

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

Christmas Eve (2020)

To God on High Be Glory

Rev. Toby Byrd

“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul 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 like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” (Isaiah 61:10, ESV)

On this glorious eve of the birth of our Lord Jesus, we bring the Advent season to a close in great anticipation of the birth of the Son of God on the morrow. Tonight we follow the advice of the prophet Isaiah who tells us to, *“Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” (Isaiah 52:9–10, ESV)*

During Advent, as we prepared for Christmas, we did so with sincere repentance. These past four weeks have had our thoughts repeatedly turning to our sins. We saw how we had failed to obey those authorities whom God has placed over us, our parents, teachers, pastors and others. We saw how we failed to be kind to our neighbor and our family members, brothers and sisters, wives and husbands. We saw how our hearts were filled with evil desires leading us away from God, tempting us not to love God with our whole heart. We saw how we have not prayed to His holy name as often as we have needed. Time and again we saw how we have forgotten to thank Him for His blessings, how we have not always been glad to come to church and to hear His holy Word. Thus, in the face of our transgressions, we saw that we dare not forget that God has threatened to punish all who transgress His commandments. It was only a couple of weeks ago that we heard about Jesus coming again with His holy angels, in all His glory, to judge the living and the dead. In that message we heard that at that time everyone will have to appear before Him to give an account for the way they lived. Often these truths of our sinful lives frighten us. And rightly so. Indeed, so much do they frighten us that we might ask, “Can we truly be joyous tonight knowing that Jesus may return this very evening?” Well, as we also learned during Advent, the answer to that question is a resounding yes! For we are children of God. We are, as Isaiah says, clothed in the garments of salvation and robed in the righteousness of Christ. This blessed gift was given to us when God made us His children in those blessed waters of baptism. So, yes, we are sinners, but we are also saints because of the gift of faith given us by the Holy Spirit to believe in life ending salvation brought to all men by the death of the One whom we worship tonight, the very Son of God whose birthday we’ll celebrate tomorrow.

As I look around the nave this evening, I can see the smiling faces of those who are convinced that they are not awaiting the pronouncement of a well-deserved, severe sentence. So, you are not gathered here this evening to be frightened by listening to a Judge who will condemn you. No, you are assembled this evening to hear a message so wonderful that heaven and earth are resounding with songs of joy and gladness. It is true, the Advent season did speak of sin and punishment and sorrow, but it also spoke of a Messiah, which means One who is anointed by God to be the Great Deliverer of God’s children; you and me.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of the coming Messiah in many and various ways. In the Sixty-first chapter of his book, Isaiah speaks of the Lord's Anointed. Now there can be no doubt that he is speaking of our Lord Jesus: because Jesus read from this very section of Isaiah when in the synagogue at Capernaum He said, **"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."** (**Luke 4:21, ESV**) This entire chapter is filled with good tidings, the glad tidings of Christmas joy. The Messiah's great mission, the prophet said, would be, **"to bring good news to the poor . . . to bind up the brokenhearted . . . to proclaim liberty to the captives . . . [to open] the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor . . . to comfort all who mourn . . . to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, [and] the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness"** (**Isaiah 61:1-3, ESV**). But the greatest gifts the Messiah would bring to a world dying of sin would be His garment of salvation and His robe of righteousness.

When Isaiah mentions the gift of our Lord's garment of salvation, this is not the first time in holy Scripture where clothing is mentioned. In fact, the first mention of clothing in holy Scripture is at the time of Adam's fall into sin? As soon as our first parents disobeyed God by eating of the forbidden fruit, they became aware of their sin, and their sin revealed their nakedness, and they were shamed by this revelation. They had disobeyed God, the God who had blessed them abundantly and loved them with a love unmatched by man. But despite all their blessings they were not satisfied, they wanted more. So following the enticement of Satan, they ate from the forbidden fruit. Oh to be certain they were sorry, but their sorrow came after their sinful deed. It came when it was too late, and this frightened them. They thought there is no doubt that as soon as God sees us, He will see our sin. So maybe if we can hide ourselves from Him, everything will be ok! Thus, they said, let us cover ourselves. But God knows and sees all. He saw their sin as soon as it was committed. Despite knowing that God already knew, they still tried to hide their sin by trying to hide themselves, by trying to cover their nakedness, and thus their sin, with leaves.

Oh foolish Adam and Eve, God had no trouble finding them and when He did, they knew they could not fool Him. Angered by their feeble attempt to cover themselves with leaves, while also knowing they would require better clothing once He removed them from the Garden, God removed the covering they had made and gave them new clothing made from the skins of animals. Sin had come into the Garden, into Paradise, destroying the peace that God had established, destroying the relationship man had with God. Yet, it was God plan to correct the wrong, to restore the peace He had with man before man's fall into sin. But this required sacrifice. The covering God made for Adam and Eve was not only clothing for their bodies, but it also covered their sin, and this covering required the blood of sacrificed animals, which pointed to the final blood sacrifice that would cover all men's sin with the garment of righteousness, the atoning sacrifice of the God's only begotten Son on the Altar of the Cross, the sacrifice of the Babe whose birth we celebrate tomorrow.

Time and again Holy Scripture speaks of righteousness as something that must be put on like clothing. In Psalm 132 David prays: **"Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let your saints shout for joy."** (**Psalm 132:9, ESV**) Moreover, in that same Psalm God answers, saying, **"Her priests I will clothe with salvation, and her saints will shout for joy."** (**Psalm 132:16, ESV**) In the book of Zechariah we read that the high priest Joshua was covered with filthy garments. But **"the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments."** (**Zechariah 3:4, ESV**) In the parable of the wedding feast our Lord Jesus shows that a man cannot stand before God without new garments. Jesus describes a guest who is cast out from the wedding-feast because he refused to wear the wedding-garment which the host had provided. Isaiah rejoices in our text because he knows that

the Messiah will clothe him with the garment of salvation and righteousness. He need not fear that he will have to appear in his own filthy garments or even naked before the throne of God.

But you might ask, “Pastor, how have these beautiful garments been prepared for me? This evening, in great anticipation, we are celebrating a special, divine birth, yet a birth that was a poor and humble birth. The Babe whose birthday we celebrate was born in a lowly stable and laid in a manger. His mother probably had to borrow the little bands of inexpensive material with which she wrapped her Baby. These meager rags were the best the world had to offer this newborn Child. Yes, it is true, this Child did not need clothing to hide His sin, because this child was sinless, He was holy. Although born in holiness and purity, it was always God’s plan to lay the filthy garments of man’s sins upon this holy Child. All the sin of which the world was guilty were charged to Him. Having fulfilled His purpose bringing men the garment of salvation and the robe of His righteousness, He was stripped of His clothing, punished, scourged, and crucified for our guilt, for our sin, for our attempts at covering ourselves with our righteousness, trying to hide from God. St. Paul and St. John say it best, ***“For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” (Romans 3:22–25, ESV) “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:2, ESV)***

He was punished in our stead; so we need not be punished. By His suffering and death He won for us the most glorious garment we could ever wear, the righteousness of the Son of God. How comforting to know that we who are truly guilty can prepare with joy for a wedding-feast and not for a culprit’s funeral. With contrite hearts we can arise from the ashes of repentance and cover ourselves with His beautiful headdress.

So come, show your gratitude for the glorious dress prepared for you by Jesus. Sing and give praise to God; but let this praise come from deep within your heart with true thanksgiving because our Lord Jesus has robed you with His robe of righteousness. The robe with which God covers His baptized children.

Thus, we pray, “O holy Christ-child, clothe us in Your blood and righteousness that finally we may stand together with that joyful band of heavenly children and sing, as we do on this glorious Christmas Eve: “To God on high be glory, And peace to all the earth!” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.