

All Decked Out for the Holidays

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Isaiah 61:1-11

If an alien from outer space should happen to descend upon our planet in a couple of weeks and make its way to the windows of our family and living rooms and watch what we do around our Christmas trees, one of the things that the alien might surmise is that Christmas Day is when certain people of a Christian persuasion take the time to re-clothe each other. For it is on Christmas Day that this alien would see that we hand each other boxes most of which contain articles of clothing that we hope and expect others to wear. We exchange the boxes, we tear the wrapping, we open the lids and we usually offer one of two responses; either “OOOOOO!” or “OOOOHHHHH!”. Despite these responses the alien would likely deduce that these Christians are very concerned about dressing each other. Of course, the alien might also grow a little confused if he followed us the next several days and watched as we took these clothes we received back to the places where our friends and family got them in order to pick out something else or to get our money back or get a store credit. If the alien watches the whole exercise from beginning to end he might really be perplexed: “Let’s see, these Christians around November and December, they go to stores to get clothing to re-clothe their friends and family, they give it to their friends and family who try it on and wear it for about three minutes and then put it back in the box and the next day when nobody is looking they take it back to the place from which it came. A very strange ritual indeed.”

Of course it doesn’t always happen that way. Some of us get lucky and either give the right article of clothing

or receive it. The right color, the right size, the right style. Maybe something you are wearing today – especially if it is Christmassy – is something you got for Christmas some years ago.

It goes to show that clothing is important to us. It has been that way the Bible suggests since the story of Adam and Eve. At the outset clothes weren’t very important. Not much thought was given to the issues of apparel. But as the story goes -- having eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – Adam and Eve begin worrying about clothing. They feel the need to hide themselves. Fig Leaves by Lucifer. The Devil wears Prada. It was our first fashion statement and a poor one at that. Born out of shame and fear. And clothing has been a big thing ever since. It becomes a statement. It says who we are. It is a way to achieve success. “Clothes define the person,” our friends on Madison Avenue might say. And so we walk through the mall and there we have it -- store after store after store of clothes. More apparel than we could ever want or need. We buy it, we wear it, we hold onto it on average for a very short time – usually until we grow tired of it or it goes out of style – and that’s why we have Goodwill stores on every other block in Sarasota.

Truth is if there is anything clothes do for us they make us self-conscious. They call not just other people’s attention to us but they call our attention to us. If you don’t think clothes make you self-conscious just try going to be a party underdressed. Or drop a big glob of ketchup on your white shirt or blouse. Or put on two different color socks by mistake. And now all of a sudden your clothes have become a burden. They are an indication of your inadequacy.

Interesting, isn’t it, that we hear so little about Jesus’ clothing. In his scores and scores of appearances in the Gospels no one takes time to mention what he’s wearing. No comments on what color or style Jesus chose. No fashion labels mentioned. Maybe he bought off the Goodwill rack. Think about it, the only significant mentions of Jesus’ clothing were, 1.) the swaddling cloths with which his mother Mary wrapped him, 2.) the hem of his robe which the

woman who had been bleeding for 12 years touched and was healed, 3.) the dazzling white robe of his transfiguration, 4.) the purple robe by which he was mocked by Roman guards, 5.) the tunic that they stripped from his body and gambled for, and 6.) the linen wrappings -- the swaddling cloths -- he left behind upon his resurrection. Someday I am going to preach a sermon on Jesus’ wardrobe ... but not today.

Now if there is any wardrobe moment in the Biblical story with which we are to be concerned it appears to be the wardrobe with which we are fitted at the end of it all. It seems that in heaven there is a dress code. There is an expectation of what you are going to wear. And there really isn’t much choice in the matter. In heaven we’re all dressed alike. Because in heaven it is by virtue of God’s grace that we are outfitted. In heaven one clothes designer, and it’s God. One clothes design in heaven, and it is grace.

John looks upon the heavenly community and wonders why they are all robed in white and the elder replies, “They have all washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

You see at the end of it all there is really only one outfit that we have to be concerned about and it’s the outfit of grace. Being clothed in the forgiveness of God. Being dressed in the love of Christ.

Something maybe to think about in this Advent season? Being clothed in the forgiveness of God, dressed in the love of Christ. This is where the story is headed – this story that begins with the shame of

Eden – the fig leaves of fear. This story that starts again with swaddling cloths with which a peasant girl wraps her newborn. This story that continues with those linen wrappings left behind in the tomb. This story that ends with you and I being clothed in white – swaddled in grace – rid of those shameful fig leaves. This is where the story is headed. From the fig leaves of fear to robes washed white.

Isaiah writes: “He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.” What better time to wonder about that than in this season of the coming of the Lord? This season of waiting and preparation? He comes with a new Christmas outfit.

Can you imagine that about yourself? Can you imagine that right now you are being clothed with the garments of salvation and covered with the robe of righteousness? And if Madison Avenue is right – then the clothes define the person. It’s where the story is headed, you know. Whether you like it or not. The good Lord is trying to get you into his garment of salvation, his robe of righteousness. Because the clothes define the person.

I remember when my parents took me to buy me my first suit. To Sears and Roebuck we went that great center of fashion. And off the rack it came and it fit close enough. And when you’re a twelve year old boy nothing much changes about you when they put a suit on you – you still run around and play with your friends and use the sleeve to wipe your nose. But the

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longer you wear the suit and the one to follow and the one to follow that the more you learn that the suit is something that calls out of you a different person. You live into your garment. You become what you wear, perhaps.

Do you remember Max Beerbohm's little tale called the Happy Hypocrite? The story of the scoundrel who fell hopelessly in love with the fair maiden but because of his poor reputation he knew that she would have nothing to do with him so he went out and had made for himself a mask – the mask of a fine gentleman of the highest character – the mask of a saint. And sure enough the young maiden fell in love with him. But now it meant he had to live into the mask. To live like a gentleman, dare even a saint. Until came the fateful day when someone suspected the mask. And they said he was wearing a mask. And they reached and pulled it off. Only to find the face of a saint. He had become what he was wearing. He had grown into his garment.

“He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.” Did you notice the tense the prophet uses? He HAS clothed me with the garments of salvation? He HAS covered me with the robe of righteousness? This is no wardrobe we have to hope for in the future? This is no outfit that requires a down payment. It's already happened. You are decked out. It's what we say time and time again over at that baptismal font. You are decked out. You are swaddled in the garments of salvation. You are dressed in the robe of righteousness. And no matter what outfit you might also want to put on. No matter what glob of junk you spill on yourself. No matter what inside your soul doesn't match. No matter what kind of sin or brokenness that doesn't want to leave you. No matter how self-conscious you might feel in front of the world -- right from the very beginning we say – You are already decked out. Decked out in the grace of God and the love of Christ. And the great joy of life is living into your outfit. Was it Thomas Morton that said - “What we have to be is what we already are.”

It makes me think of Donald Driver. Donald Driver grew up in Houston and from an early age was trouble. In seventh grade he learned from his brother the art of stealing cars. At age 12 my parents were fitting me for a suit, at age 12 Donald Driver was learning how to steal cars. Donald Driver would steal car after car, night after night. He did it to get money to support his family who had been living in the back of a U-Haul truck and to support his little drug habit. Donald Driver was sewing the leaves of figs. But then came the fateful night. He had just started up another one of his stolen cars when he heard sirens. In his haste to escape he didn't notice the old woman backing her car out of her driveway. He broadsided her ... going very, very fast. He jumped out of his demolished car and started sprinting. But something told him to go back and check the old woman. When he did he found her all right ... but by that time the police were almost on him. He looked at the woman and then looked at the approaching police cars. And that's when he heard the old woman say, “You go sit on my porch.” And Driver did. When the police came they asked, “Who's that on your porch swing?” “Oh,” she said, “that's my grandson.” When the police had gone the old woman walked up to the porch and told the young Driver to get into her house ... and that's where she tore him up one side and down the other and told him that this was his chance to become who he was. He was a child of God and it was time he started living like one. Did he turn his life around? No, not right away. A few more cars disappeared at his hand. A few more drugs consumed. But that one gesture of grace ... of love ... of caring ... of reminding him of his clothing ... took hold. Until he realized that maybe the old woman was right – maybe there was more to his life than crime. Maybe he was decked out. Maybe he was clothed in the garments of salvation. The rest, they say, is history. Donald Driver turned into the star receiver for the Green Bay Packers. All-pro wide receiver. He stole footballs out of mid-air. But the amazing thing is that not only was he a star receiver. Turns out he holds the record for the Green Bay Packers for the most community service

appearances. He holds the record for the most honorarium dollars that go into the Donald Driver Foundation that is used to help people in need. He spends a lot of time with the people of Goodwill – helping them put new outfits on people. And do you know what else he does? He keeps making trips back to Houston. He goes back there to visit the woman he calls Grandma Johnson. The woman who fitted him for his suit. Who gave him a new mask to wear.

“And who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” asked the elder.

“These are they who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

Good to know where the story begins. Good to know where the story is headed. And in between all decked out. “For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.”



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Church of the Palms

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