

February 14, 2018 (Ash Wednesday)
Joel 2:12-19, Revelation 7:9-14, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Everybody has their favorite clothes. Everybody. From those who buy trendy, expensive clothes, all the way to those who buy their clothes from Walmart or Savvy Seconds. From those who like to look flashy and formal, all the way to those who prefer to look plain and casual. No matter what clothes you buy, everybody has their favorites.

My daughter is 3 years old. But she has her favorite clothes. Emi loves stripes. If it has stripes on it, she will wear it. And many times, we can't get her dressed in the morning unless she has stripes on some part of her body. No one taught her to like stripes. For whatever reason, they're just her favorite.

People have had their own favorite clothes for almost as long as humanity has existed. In the story of Joseph, it was a coat of many colors that caused his brothers to become jealous. In the story of Naaman, expensive clothing was one of the gifts that he offered to the prophet Elisha. In the Law of Moses, the priests were told to wear a very special set of clothes while they performed sacrifices.

But the very first time we hear about clothing is actually in the story of Adam and Eve, the very first human beings. Genesis 2 makes a rather conspicuous note that after they were created Adam and Eve were both naked, and yet they felt no shame. Why should they? They were perfect human beings in a perfect marriage living in a perfect world where God had perfectly provided everything they needed. Who needs clothes in a world like that?

And yet, the moment that Adam and Eve sin, that all changes. Suddenly, they are ashamed of their bodies. Instead of looking out on this perfect world that God has given them and on the perfect God who created it, their sights are now turned inward. On their own imperfection. On their own sin. And all they want to do is cover it up.

And so, for the first time in their lives, they don't turn to God for what they need. They turn to their own feeble hands and sew fig leaves together for clothes. But even that isn't enough. When God comes looking for them, they hide. And when God asks why they hid, they say that it's because they're still naked. Even with this new clothing, they're still ashamed.

Because, truth be told, we are all naked before God. Not in a physical sense, but in a spiritual sense. When we stand before the Almighty, he sees every imperfection in us. Every sinful, shameful thing about us. We are spiritually stripped bare before him. And there is nothing we can do to cover ourselves.

Which is really the basis for the Biblical concept of putting on sackcloth and ashes. Have you ever heard that term before? It shows up all over the Bible. Particularly the Old Testament. Countless people throughout God's Word talk about putting on sackcloth and ashes. Job. Jacob. David. Jonah. Jeremiah. Hezekiah.

And the prophet Joel. Joel actually begins his book talking about sackcloth. He says right away in chapter 1, *"Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth... Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar."*

What exactly is meant by all this sackcloth and ashes talk? Well, simply put, sackcloth and ashes are about making your outside look like your inside. Making yourself physically look like you feel emotionally and spiritually. Literally, tearing off your favorite clothes and putting on the least comfortable, least attractive clothing you can find.

Have you ever felt course cloth like burlap or rough canvas? Can you imagine taking a sack made of that, cutting out a hole for your head and arms, and wearing it as clothing? It would feel awful. It would look awful.

And then, to make matters worse, you take a handful of ash out of the fireplace and dump it on your head. You would look and feel like a complete disaster. And that's the point. Your sin is a disaster. You are a disaster.

Mankind was made perfect. In the very image of God. Sinless and unashamed in our nakedness. And now that image is destroyed. You are dead in your sins. Doomed to return to the ground from whence you came. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

And that's exactly what Joel is addressing in his entire prophecy. He is talking to a people whose lives are filled with sin. But they've gone one step further, in a sense. Because they continue to put on the physical trappings of repentance without doing so in their hearts as well.

They have put on sackcloth and ashes, but they have not returned to the Lord. They have torn their garments, but they have not broken their hearts. Which is the whole point of putting on sackcloth and ashes.

It's exactly the problem that Jesus identified in our Gospel lesson. People who go around wearing sackcloth. Disfiguring their face with ashes. But have no repentance in their hearts. They, like the people of Joel's day, are putting sackcloth and ashes only to be seen by others. Seen as humble and contrite and pious. Without realizing that they are still spiritually naked before the Lord. And he sees the hypocrisy of their hearts.

That's the thing about the clothing we put on ourselves. Whether it's fine garments or fig leaves or sackcloth and ashes. We always do it to hide our sin and shame. We always do it to fool ourselves into believing that we're not spiritually naked before God's eyes.

And yet, not every piece of clothing is something that we choose or create for ourselves. Sometimes, that clothing is given to us. Adam and Eve thought they could hide behind fig leaves. It didn't work. But God didn't leave them naked. He killed an animal and clothed them with its skins.

It was the very first sacrifice done to cover humanity's sins. The very first blood shed to take away our guilt. And those sacrifices would continue generation after generation. God's people would quickly learn that God had not left them naked and shameful. That by sacrifice and blood, shed over and over and over again, they could be right with God.

But even those sacrifices were always pointing forward to the day when one who had no shame was stripped naked before God's people. When one who was a perfect sacrifice felt his skin cut from his body by whips and thorns and nails and spear. When one who knew no sin shed his blood that we might be right with God.

Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, is our robe of righteousness. His blood has cleansed us and made us white as snow. His righteousness has blotted out our sin. While we were still sitting in sackcloth and ashes. While we were still scrounging for fig leaves. He was giving us garments of salvation.

For the Lord is merciful. Slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. He has spared his people and taken their reproach from them. He who cast us out of the garden has given us a treasure in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and thieves do not steal. Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

And it is at the Lamb's feast that we kneel this day. Our foreheads covered in ashes of repentance. But our hearts filled with the gladness that comes from Christ's Body and Blood. A robe of righteousness that covers our sin and shame. So that we might stand before the throne of God. Declaring the praises of him who brought us out of darkness into his wondrous light.

Everybody has their favorite clothes. We like how they make us look. We like how they make us feel. Because we certainly couldn't walk around naked.

The same is true spiritually as well. We all have our spiritual clothes. But I didn't buy mine. I didn't make mine. I did nothing to earn the robe I wear. It was given to me as a gift. And it is my favorite piece of clothing. My most treasured possession. For because of this robe, I am a child of God. Amen.