

"The Year of the Lord's Favor"

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Join me in prayer: O God, open us up. Open our eyes that we might see, and open our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts, God, that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.

We have a wedding coming up in three weeks in my house. One of my daughters. Daughters always seem to be getting married these days. So it kind of sucks the air out of the room, most of the time. I have to establish wedding free zones in which we can enter and not consider how we tie ribbons around things and other such things that go with weddings. I was instructed just before Christmas to return five sets of shoes to a shoe store which shall remain nameless. And we had ordered those shoes on line for bridesmaids because the bridesmaids are all my daughters. They all came to my house and we have all these shoes. So I take them back to the store. Now they were ordered on line but there is a store from the same company that they say you can take them back to. So I set this huge shopping bag of shoes on the counter and it's Christmas and it's stressful in this store. And the manager is working the counter, and I say, "I need to return these shoes." He said, "All of these shoes you need to return?" I said, "Yes, we need to return all of these shoes." And he opens them, and says, "They're all exactly alike!" And I said, "Yes, that's true. But my daughter, the bride, was looking for sparkly silver shoes." He takes them out of the box and he holds them up and he says, "They look like sparkly silver shoes to me." And I said, "Well, frankly, sir,

they look like sparkly silver shoes to me, too. However, what you think and what I think is really of no consequence. This is all about whether the bride thinks these are sparkly silver shoes enough or not, and they're sparkly enough for what we're looking for. So you will take them back." He said, "Do you have the credit card they were purchased with?" And I said, "No, I do not." And he said, "Then I can't take them back."

Well, that's annoying. We had a little conversation. He won and I took them. My daughter took them back and went apparently through the exact same ritual of conversation with him at the time when she took them back with her credit card.

Now the moral of this story is really simple. That apparently in a wedding what you wear, matters a lot. I suggest to you that if you read the Scripture it says the same thing. That this idea of being dressed appropriately matters a lot. Not like in the shallow sense of what you wear to church matters. But what you put on the outside of you.

The Scripture we read this morning talks about what you will wear, and I want to invite you to think about what your wardrobe will be in 2012. What shall you put on?

Here's the first thing. Will you put on praise and gladness? To give you a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, a mantle - that's a coat - of praise instead of a heavy spirit.

I just love this single verse. If you read it in the Hebrew it has a word play. The word for "ashes" is the word PAER, and the word for "garland" is "APAER." SO what it says is we're going to give you a headdress of victory. The garland that was worn by the Olympic champion. We're going to give you a garland instead of victory, instead of the ashes of mourning. We're going to anoint your head with oil, my cup runneth over. We're

going to have you put on that coat of gladness. That coat of praise instead of a heavy spirit.

Some years ago as we began the Lenten season, I was leading a Bible study and I asked the people around the table what they were giving up for Lent. One woman was giving up caffeine, and someone was giving up chocolate, and someone was not eating meat on Fridays. And one lady said, "I am giving up sadness for Lent. I have carried it too long. It's time to let it go."

Wow!

There was an old movie that came out several years ago and it never really made it big but I thought it was excellent. Maybe because it resonated with my life in some way. It's called "Shall We Dance?" It's about this man who would ride the EL - the elevated train in Chicago. He rode it to work everyday, and he didn't like his job, he was unhappy in his marriage, he was struggling and he was just going through life. And he would stop at this one place and look out the window and he could see a dance studio. And through the window of the dance studio he saw a woman who was teaching people how to dance. And every day when they stopped at that place he looked there and he'd see her. Things would start spinning in his mind and finally he takes all of his courage, he gets off the train and he goes in and begins to talk to the woman. You have this uncomfortable feeling as it's beginning because you think maybe he's going to have an affair with her. But you know what he does? He learns to dance. She teaches him how to dance. He hides it from his wife for some time and then it's more than he can bear. He explains to her that he has decided that this is what he's going to do. He is wasting his life just plodding along and he's going to dance. He's going to celebrate; he's going to put on the mantle of praise instead of the faint spirit, the oil of gladness. He's

going to wear a headdress of victory instead of the ashes of mourning.

I have a good friend and when I ask him how he's doing, you know, just making small talk, he says, "Terrific!" I'm always taken aback a little by his response because he's decided.

So what are you going to wear?

It really goes on. The Scripture says in verses 10 and 11: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exalt 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 with garland. As a bride adorns herself with jewels."

So you will put on the robe of righteousness, the garments of salvation.

What's a Christian wear? What are garments of salvation? The robe of righteousness. You might think of things like they carry a big leather Bible around. They go to church every Sunday and they pray a lot. All important things.

But I don't think those are the garments of salvation. Actually, when read it I thought of another passage about what you wear. It comes from Colossians and we read it a few minutes ago as we began the service. "As God's chosen ones holy and beloved, clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, 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."

I think those are the garments of salvation. It's what Paul teaches us. The robe of righteousness.

This last week one of the pillars of St. Luke's passed away. Carl Mueller. What a guy! When I think of being clothed

with kindness, and compassion and humility and meekness and patience, I think of Carl. Those of you who didn't know him I wish you had the chance. Because he had this sense of meekness, it's not that he was afraid of anything it was that he didn't think that the whole world revolved around him. There was just a spirit within him.

A woman came to see me not long ago. She was worried about her husband and she said, "It just seems that his heart is getting harder and harder." Now as she shared that it resonated with me. Kind of like I thought to myself, "You know as I've gotten older I think my heart has gotten harder and harder."

There's an old Chinese proverb that beside the heart there's a little wheel. And that little wheel has little spikes on it, and that every time something happens to you that's bad that hurts, that wheel spins. Makes one little turn. It kind of cuts into your heart and your heart bleeds. But the Chinese proverb goes, that if too much happens and it spins too much then a little callous develops on the side of your heart and you can't feel anymore.

I think sometimes some of us are losing our sense of compassion and kindness. I find sometimes I'm more judgmental than I used to be. Not in an angry looking down way, but in sort of evaluating everything. Is this good or is this bad? Is this right or is this wrong? It's like the weight of the world kind of pushes down and after a while your heart just can't really hold it anymore. And what this Scripture says is that there's a sense that God's going to put on us this garment of salvation, this robe of righteousness. In humility, and compassion, and kindness and goodness. And all of those things become who we are again.

The question then becomes, "How do you change your clothes?" How do you put on this new wardrobe that God has given us?

Let me take a bit of an aside here because I think it's important. The Scripture begins with a reference to "The Year of the Lord's Favor." The scholars aren't sure what that exactly means. This part of Isaiah, what we call Second Isaiah, is referring to the Children of Israel coming home from their Exile in Babylon. Sixty years they've been in captivity, slaves in Babylon. They've been set free and they're coming home. So it may be that this is the year of the Lord's favor that the Children of Israel are coming home again and we're going to celebrate. But it may be that he's referring to the Year of the Jubilee.

Here's what the Year of the Jubilee was. We're not sure if Israel actually practiced fully the Year of the Jubilee but it's outlined in Leviticus. Here's what it was: every seventh year there would be a Sabbath for the land. The lands would lie fallow, and no one would plant. So they would have to be saving up grain for those seven years so they could leave it all fallow for the seventh year. Then after seven cycles of seven years, that's 49 years - then the 50th year was to be a Year of the Jubilee. That year all debts were forgiven, all lands were returned to their former owners. All slaves were set free.

Here's the picture of the Year of the Jubilee. It's that God creates us and the world as this sort of perfect system. Then over time it gets askew, out of whack - that's a deep theological term - out of whack. It gets askew and there's tension that's put on it. It gets twisted. Then every 50th year it's released again. So as it's twisted, the relationships between us become tense and broken and the hurts are there and

there's resentments. Then every 50th year everything's put back right.

Now why that speaks to me is that I think that's we're talking about with this robes of righteousness and garments of salvation. It's how this happens for us. We go through year after year after year and life bears down on us. We find it's like there's a tension put on us. It kind of twists us. And it hurts and it gets everything with pressure and tension upon it. Relationships get broken and our hearts are hurting, It's like what God's is saying here, "I'm going to let it go." We're taking that pressure off and it's going back to the way it would be.

"I made you to be joyous. People full of celebration. I created you to love me and celebrate me. I created you to be kind and humble and good." And over time that gets goofed up. And this is the year of the Lord's favor. We're putting it back the way it was. We're restoring you and creation to the way it was intended.

So what that means is that we don't have to by the strength and grit of our teeth put on kindness and humility and patience. It's not a resolution that we're resolved "I'm going to do this, no matter what."

Listen to the images of the words God uses and the pictures that are there. It says, "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."

The picture is that God is dressing us.

Have you ever tried to dress someone who didn't want to be dressed? You know, a two year old who says, "No, I'm not wearing that."

What this brings to us is the realization that we are in partnership with God. But it goes on, it just doesn't stop there. It shifts into a different picture. "...as a bridegroom decks himself with garlands, and as a bride adorns herself with jewels." Paul in Colossians uses image "...clothe yourselves with compassion..."

So this is a partnership. God wants us to dress us in this garment of salvation. Ut we have to let him, we have to participate. We have to give in fully to this promise of God. That's what this covenant that we're going to join in a minute as we say together the Wesley Covenant Prayer.

Have you ever seen the movie "My Big, Fat Greek Wedding"? I loved that movie. There's a scene in it where she's getting dressed for her wedding and all of her sisters and cousins and everybody are hovering round her. They're dressing her, and dressing her and are like all over her, helping her get dressed. Then there's a moment when she stands in front of the mirror and there's silence. Then she says, "You're beautiful!"

That's what God wants for us. To clothe us in this marvelous garment like a bride. And to say, "You're beautiful!"

I remember when I first put on a clergy robe. I was in Duncanville, Texas and I was an intern. They'd told me to show up for the first worship service there. They didn't tell me to bring a robe and I didn't have one. I had borrowed a robe earlier for my deacon's ordination, but I showed up and I didn't have a robe. So I showed up and the pastor said, "Let's get robed up." Tom Peel was his name. We were standing in the sacristy. I said, "Uh...this is going to be a problem. I have no robe." Tom said, "You know, I have an old one." I will not forget it. He put a stole on it and he held it up like this, and I slid my arms in and he came around in front of me and he zipped it up. And he straightened the stole on my shoulders.

Then he said, "Look!" And I looked in the mirror, and there was a transformation.

We're not shallow enough to believe that just somehow automatically makes things different. But what it does do is to join in God's work in changing us.

So my friends, in 2012 God has given you a marvelous incredible new wardrobe. A whole new wardrobe. A wardrobe of joy and of gladness. A mantle of praise. A set of clothes of humility, of kindness and compassion, and patience and meekness. The garments of salvation. The robe of righteousness. Would you let him dress you? Would you let God dress you in that?

I want to invite you if you would to take your bulletin and to share in our decision to allow God to dress us, to be a part of this covenant. Would you stand as we say together the Wesley Covenant Prayer:

Let us pray together. I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt, put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee, or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant that I have made on earth let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.