

“Heart to Heart: Sackcloth and Ashes to Robes of Righteousness”

We do love our clothes, don't we? It is no accident that there so many clothing stores and shop after shop in the malls that offer one style of garment or the other. These stores and shops are scattered throughout most every town and city. Can you imagine if there was only one clothing store selling only one style of clothing intended for all people? I think there'd be a riot for sure. How would we express our individuality? How would we strut our stuff? How would we survive without our glad rags and pretty coverings?

Pretty coverings; but what are we covering up? The coverings may be beautiful, but what lurks beneath? The easy answer is that we are covering our nakedness because we are modest and proper, but there is more to it than that. In the Scriptures, coverings, garments, and clothing that cover nakedness are in reality covering our shame. Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden, and they realize their nakedness. Suddenly, they know their sin, and because of that knowledge, they are ashamed. So, they sew together fig leaves so the Lord God can't see their shame, so He doesn't discover their sin when He walks through the garden. It didn't work. It was the wrong kind of garment.

We wear our beautiful clothes to hide our nakedness. We believe we can deceive God and He will not take note of our shame. We want to be responsible and cover up our sin. But, it doesn't work, does it? Our man-made garments are but filthy rags. And what they attempt to cover is even worse.

Our heart is filled with sin and shame. If the desires of our heart were laid bare for all to see, we would truly be ashamed. Evil thoughts, sexual desires, selfish wants, impure motives, jealousy, anger, envy, drunkenness, strife, idolatry; need I go on? This is the condition of our heart, of our inner being that we seek to hide, to cover with our man-made clothing. Yet, man is not able, he is not capable of hiding the truth from God. We may fool those around us, and we may be fooled by those around us, but the Lord God sees the condition of all our hearts.

From dust we came, and to dust we shall return Scripture tells us. Man is born into this world a sinner, and his journey is back to the ground, back to dust. All of our attempts to cover up our sin, every effort to pay up always results in the same destination: dust. Born to die, we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

It is into such a sorry spiritual state of affairs that the prophet Joel speaks. The people of Israel have wandered away from their God. They have been unfaithful in word and deed. They have sought other gods and played the harlot. So the Lord will turn them over to disaster. They will be oppressed and downtrodden. They will suffer want and will weep in their distress. Thus, Joel calls out, “Rend your hearts and not your garments.” The ancient tradition was to express terrible anxiety and distress by tearing your garments, thereby revealing your state of sorrow. But Joel knows that the rending of garments will only reveal the problem: a corrupt and sinful heart. A torn garment shows the problem, a torn heart begins to heal the problem.

Rend your hearts and not your garments! Put on sackcloth and ashes. Repent! Return to the Lord! King David tells us in Psalm 51, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.” Repent! Return to the Lord. Yes, it is a journey, a Lenten journey, a return from exile. Our sin has separated us from our God. Sin is the dividing wall of hostility that destroys the relationship between God and man.

Our sin has exiled us from the presence of the Lord. He has seen our sin and shame, and that sin and shame have exiled us from the presence of God. Return to the Lord with repentant hearts. Put on sackcloth and ashes—repent.

So we have gathered here this day to put on ashes, to repent of our sin. We know our sin, and it is ever before us. We know the sorry condition of our blackened hearts. We know that we, of our own strength and power, cannot return from our sin-stained exile. We know we cannot return to the presence of our God. The ashes remind us of our sin. They remind us of the condition of our hearts. But ashes in the sign of the cross remind us of a gracious and merciful God.

We who are helpless and hopeless sinners are told, “Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Joel 2:13). We, who can do nothing, have a God who has willingly done everything. Ashes show our sin; ashes in the sign of the cross show us the true nature of our God.

The cross! An instrument of torture and death and the means by which God cleansed our hearts and exchanged our garments. The cross—the place where Jesus is raised up in our place. The cross—the place where Jesus is stripped of His robe and all of our sin is revealed as He hangs naked in our stead. For He who knew no sin became sin for us. We attempt to cover our sin, but Jesus reveals it so that it might be washed away by His blood. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrow. Ashes in the sign of the cross.

A gracious and merciful God has offered up His only-begotten Son so that the sin that has exiled us from His presence might be washed away and we might be restored to His presence—a return from exile, a Lenten journey. And where does this journey end? Not at the cross, not even at the empty tomb; the journey ends in the courts of heaven!

Again, listen to the words of St. John as he describes those who are gathered around the throne of the Lamb in His kingdom in Revelation chapter 7:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

See the great multitude who wave palm branches as they worship their Savior. Note that they are clothed in white robes. These are no fig leaves they wear; they are not adorned in filthy rags. They are clothed in white robes, robes that have been cleansed, washed in the blood of the Lamb. Their garments of sackcloth have been exchanged for robes of righteousness.

The sackcloth and ashes are gone, for Christ’s journey to the cross clothes His Bride, the Church. It is the blood of Jesus that washes away sin. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all unrighteousness. The blood of Jesus washes our robes and makes them white. Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.

Blackened, corrupt hearts covered by fig leaves and animal hides—such is the cause of our exile. Exiled from the presence of God, we adorn our foreheads with ashes. We come before God with repentant hearts. And God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God provides His Son in our place. Jesus endures the cross in our stead. Blood is shed, holy and precious blood that washes away and cleanses from all sin. Our hearts are restored, and our sackcloth and ashes are exchanged for garments of salvation and robes of righteousness. The exile is over, the journey is finished. We are returned to the presence of our God, and we rejoice in the robes the Bridegroom has provided for His Bride, the robes He has provided for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.