

Clothed with Joy ©

Psalm 30

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As you were getting dressed for worship today, were you mindful of what clothes you were going to wear? Were you thinking – cool and comfy? Or, something that would look nice and dressy? Were you picking out your favorite dress or perhaps deciding to wear your most fashionable pants to church? (I know at least one person who came today wearing their “smarty pants.”)

Both of our Scripture lessons today speak of clothing. Paul writes to the Colossians “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”

Today’s reading from the Psalms – a Psalm of David – mentions a another kind of clothing, although it goes nicely with the wardrobe that Paul suggests. David says, ‘You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy!’

Did any of you come wearing sackcloth today? If you did, I’m here to give you good news! Your wardrobe of sackcloth can be exchanged for something much better!

The sackcloth was a symbol of grief or repentance, of remorse and sorrow, of mourning.

There are numerous Scriptures in the Old Testament that says people put on sackcloth and poured ashes on their heads as a sign of mourning – whether it be mourning (or grieving) because of loss of life or loss of a way of life (like the Israelites when captured by the Babylonians and the temple was destroyed;

Or as the Ninevites did when Jonah came (at last) to their city and told them to repent of their sin or God would destroy them. Not only did the king and all the people sit in sackcloth and ashes, but they even had their animals covered in sackcloth! (Jonah 8)

Why sackcloth? I remember the feedbags the feed came in for our cattle when I was growing up. They were burlap – rough and scratchy. Once in a while, mom would take some and cut holes for our neck and arms and would wash them so they would be a little softer and we used them for costumes.

Sackcloth being put on in place of regular clothes was meant to be a symbol of shame and remorse, or grief –all signs of a happy life are removed – no color, no comfort, no vanity – just plain, stark, scratchy, ugly clothes.

The Psalmist describes his mourning as being in the Pit. He declares, “O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, you restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.” Both Sheol and the Pit were designated as the place of the dead.

Some of the definitions of a pit from a couple of online dictionaries (Websters and dictionary-online.com) are:

- a naturally formed or excavated hole or cavity in the ground: pits caused by erosion; clay pits.
- a covered or concealed excavation in the ground, serving as a trap.
- the abode of evil spirits and lost souls; hell: an evil inspiration from the pit.
- a place or situation of futility, misery, or degradation

In other words, a pit is a horrible, dark place that would be difficult, if not impossible, to get out of without help. Imagine – slick, steep, walls of eroded mud or clay.

I've often thought a pit is a very good description of that emotional and mental place we can end up in because of deep grief or remorse or shame. It is the darkest of places that is so deep we need someone to help pull us out.

Some of us have been there. A few of us might be there right now, or at least, feeling like you might be sliding in.

But this is a psalm of thanksgiving and gladness! The Psalmist proclaims that, whatever it was that caused his grieving – and it seems like it might have been something he had done, or something his enemies did against him - “the Lord’s anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

Whatever it was that caused the Psalmist to be in that Pit of grief and despair, this beautiful Psalm is his declaration that God saved him. God pulled him out of that dark place, removed his grief clothes and dressed him in shiny new clothes – the clothes of joy.

“You have turned my mourning into dancing,” he joyfully proclaims.

Remember our first Easter here together? Our two liturgical dancers came up the isle wearing dark cloaks over their heads and bodies. The Scripture was read about Jesus being dead and buried.

The two figures represented the women who came in the early dawn into the garden to anoint the dead body of Jesus. And the Scripture said they found the stone rolled away and the body gone.

The two figures fell flat on the floor in grief and fear, their dark cloaks covering their bodies.

But remember how the words came to them, “He is not here, He is risen from the dead!” And the music “Morning Has Broken” began to play and suddenly their grief was

turned into joy. Their cloaks of grief were thrown off and they rose up dancing, twirling with gladness and exuberance. And they were joined by others who came dancing into the garden.

Have you known that kind of joy - that sweet relief after a time of mourning? Have you known the feeling of forgiveness that washed over you; that sure knowledge of being loved and that glad relief of having another chance.

Perhaps you have had a great debt that was finally paid. Or something you have been so anxious about that was worked out. I think those are ways of describing that transformation from mourning to joy and dancing.

What is joy, anyway? Is it happiness? Is it a feeling you have when everything is going your way?

I think joy is something so much deeper than happiness, don't you? I often pray for families, at the time of the death of a loved one, to have joy – joy in the midst of their tears and grief and pain. Joy that is deep inside their hearts because they know the Lord is with them through all their hurt; because they know their loved one has been delivered from that pit of sickness and death.

Frederick Buechner wrote “Happiness turns up more or less where you'd expect it to – a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. Joy, on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it.” That was a quote I found in a book titled, “The Lessons of St. Francis.”

St. Francis of Assisi was the son of a wealthy man, but he gave it all up to live a life of poverty, caring for all things living – animals, the poor. “St. Francis claimed that one of the reasons he experienced deep joy was because he intentionally walked away from the things in life that steal our joy.”¹

I understand that statement, I think. Sometimes we work so hard, save so diligently, spend too much, worry about our house, our cars, our clothes, our retirement – trying to grasp that dream-life. Yet, the harder we strive for all that we are told will make us happy, the more we can be robbed of that happiness.

We work so much we don't have free time with family; time to just rest and be. We spend so much we fall into debt and wonder how we will ever crawl out. (I call that the pits for sure!)

True joy is knowing those things are not what is important. True joy is trusting in God for what we need and for taking care of us.

¹ John Michael Talbot, *The Lessons of St. Francis*, p. 40, Plume Publishing, ©1998

In the same book, the author, John Michael Talbot writes “Even though joy can’t be produced or manufactured, there are things you can do to increase the likelihood that you’ll encounter joy in your own life.”

- **Don’t Worry about Tomorrow** – embrace the immediate moment. Practice being present when you’re washing dishes, cutting the grass, relaxing in the bathtub, or taking out the trash. Learn how to be alive in the here and now instead of dreaming of something better.
- **Be thankful** – that is what the Psalmist is writing in our Psalm today. He is thanking God and asking others to join him in giving thanks for what God has done for him. Keep a journal and write down 5 things every night that you are thankful for from the day. You will find an attitude of thankfulness beginning to be a part of your life.
- **Be forgiving** – Our anger towards another strangles our hearts and cuts off the flow of peace and joy. Our Epistle reading from Colossians reminds us of how important forgiveness is. “Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you.”

John Donne said, “True joy is the earnest wish we have of heaven, it is a treasure of the soul, and therefore should be laid in a safe place, and nothing in *this* world is safe to place it in.”²

“The earnest wish we have of heaven ...” What a great description of spiritual, indescribable joy!” Keeping our eyes and our hearts on what is real, what is truly important - the things of the Kingdom of God, of course – those are the things that will cultivate joy.

And that is exactly what Paul is encouraging the church in Colossae to do – to keep their thoughts and minds on Christ and things above. For it is really, only Christ who can give us that deep eternal joy.

If you are walking in the valley, or sliding into the pit, remember, weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

Do not fear, for the Lord your Creator and Redeemer is watching over you, ready to pull you up and to change your clothes from the sackcloth of grief, or remorse, or shame, to the glad and beautiful clothes of joy.

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. Dance with joy for He has forgiven, he will transform you, he *has* given you new life and the promise of life eternal.

² Et al, p. 51-53

That is cause for deep, abiding joy – even in those times when you are perhaps not that happy.

The joy of the Lord is our strength. Thanks be to God!

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