

**“Robes of Righteousness” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Ash Wednesday  
March 2, 2022**

- I. **Joel 2:12-13** - “Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the Lord, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and He relents over disaster.
- II. **We sure love clothes, right?**
- a. It’s interesting, but our country is overrun with clothing stores – go to the mall or any other main street and we see a huge number of shops with different styles of clothing.
  - b. Imagine if there was only one clothing store... selling only one style of clothing for everyone...
    - i. That would probably end up with riots in the streets.
    - ii. Our personal style and individuality would be taken away... we couldn’t strut around with our unique look...
    - iii. We might even feel lost without our fancy coverings.
  - c. The coverings might look nice enough, but what are we covering up?
    - i. I suppose the first thing that comes to mind is we cover our nakedness because it is modest and right... but Scripture says more about it than that...
    - ii. The Bible says coverings, garments, and clothing that cover nakedness are actually covering our shame.
    - iii. As Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden, they realized what?
      1. I’m naked!!
      2. In an instant, they know their sin, and because of that knowledge, they’re ashamed.
      3. So, they sew together fig leaves so God doesn’t see their shame...
      4. Sadly, the first attempt at a garment was a miserable failure... it was the wrong kind of garment.
- III. **We still try the same trick today...**
- a. We wear these beautiful “clothes” to hide our nakedness, and just maybe if we look like we have it all together, God won’t notice our sin and shame.
    - i. That’s no better than those dumb fig leaves.
    - ii. Scripture says that anything we put together amounts to “filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6).
  - b. You see, the problem is deeper than the clothing we try to put on... because our sin and shame are a matter of the heart.

- c. And let me tell you, if our heart (our true desires and brokenness) was open for anyone to see – I’m not sure we could bear the shame.
  - i. Evil thoughts, sexual desires, selfish wants, impure motives, jealousy, anger, envy, drunkenness, strife, idolatry... the list goes on and on.
  - ii. This is the condition of our heart, of our inner being that we try to hide, to cover up with the “clothing” that we cobble together.
  - iii. But let’s be clear... we might fool the people around us... but we are not fooling God.
  - iv. God knows and sees the condition of our hearts.

IV. **From dust we came, and to dust we shall return.**

- a. Every single person who is born into this world is a sinner, and the path is always the same... back to the ground... to dust.
- b. Any work we do to cover up our sinful condition and behavior always leads to the same thing... dust.
  - i. Our fate is death, and no one gets out of that one... we are dust and to dust we shall return.
- c. This is the sorry state of affairs that the prophet Joel is speaking to.
- d. God’s chosen people, the Israelites, have spent hundreds of years walking away from their God...
  - i. They have wandered away on every level... in thought, in word, and in deed.
  - ii. They trusted in other gods to deliver them.
  - iii. In the end, God sends a hammer to wake them up – as foreign powers conquer them.
  - iv. They will cry out to the Lord in distress and seek His help.
- e. And Joel says, “Rend your hearts and not your garments.”
  - i. In those days, the tradition people followed when they felt distress or major anxiety was to tear their garments.
    - 1. It was an outward sign that someone was in great distress and sorrow on the inside.
  - ii. Joel is saying that tearing your clothes will only expose the problem of a sinful heart... but the true healing begins when the heart is torn.

V. **Rend your hearts and not your garments!**

- a. Put on sackcloth and ashes...
  - i. Repent! Return to the Lord!
  - ii. Come home to Jesus...
- b. King David tells us in Psalm 51 that the kind of sacrifices God wants from us are “a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart”
- c. A part of the journey in Lent is to come back home to Jesus from our exile of sin and brokenness.

d. As our sin divides and separates us from God... destroys our relationship with Him and others... it causes us to go into exile... our sin and shame have exiled us from God's presence.

VI. **Yet, we have a reminder of something different today.**

a. It's the ashes in the shape of a cross on our foreheads.

b. First of all, it's a reminder that we can't do anything to cover our own sin and shame... we are dust...

c. Most importantly, it's in the shape of a cross to remind us of Jesus our Savior.

d. Joel says, "Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13)

e. Yes, the cross, a symbol of torture and death... is also the purest and most loving thing God could do for us.

i. The cross is how God cleansed our hearts and gave us new clothes.

ii. You see, Jesus was stripped of His clothes and nailed to the cross... the Person who never sinned became sin for us.

iii. In a powerful and loving way, Jesus died to call us home from our exile of sin and death.

iv. Through faith in Him, you stand forgiven.

VII. **The great gift of forgiveness and restoration doesn't stop here.**

a. As we talk about returning from exile through the work of Christ, the cross and empty tomb are not the end of the journey – it's heaven!

b. Listen to the words of St. John as he describes the people gathered around the throne of the Lamb in His kingdom:

i. 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..."

c. Note that they are clothed in white robes... They aren't wearing any fig leaves... or filthy rags.

i. They are clothed in white robes... robes that have been cleansed, or washed in the blood of the Lamb.

ii. Their sackcloth and ashes have been exchanged for robes of righteousness.

iii. God took away the sin and shame and nailed them to a cross.

d. The exile is over... God has bridged the gap... He has overcome what we could not... so walk freely in your new clothes, because they are priceless. Amen<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sermon based on "Return from Exile: A Lenten Journey," a publication of Concordia Publishing House