

You Are What You Wear

Baruch 5:1-9

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Introduction to Scripture

Today's Scripture reading from Baruch is not the typical choice of preachers from the readings in the Advent lectionary. But while it may not obviously point toward the birth of a baby in a manger, it provides a timeless message worth hearing in Advent: "Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God."

For many people, Advent, the time leading up to the holidays, is joyful. But for others, it can be a time of sadness, even dread, when we drape ourselves in a cloak of sadness, regret, or loss. So for the people who are peppily preparing for Christmas, the cloak of sorrow may be the last thing they are thinking of, but others may understand what this ancient writer means.

What comes next may sound like a tall order. Can you imagine that you might "Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting; for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven"? Imagine what God is saying to the cheerful as well as the sad, as you hear the Scripture, for Advent is a time of preparation, perhaps just the right time to consider a new wardrobe.

Scripture: Baruch 5:1-9 (Second Sunday in Advent, Year C, December 10, 2006)

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting; for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven. For God will give you evermore the name, "Righteous Peace, Godly Glory."

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east at each word of the holy One, rejoicing that God has remembered them. For they went out from you on foot, led away by their enemies; but God will bring them back to you, carried in glory, as on a royal throne. For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God. The woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God's command.

Sermon

I came across a rather exhilarating headline from the local weekly newspaper, *The Glen Ellyn Sun*, last week. You may be thinking, "I don't associate my weekly local newspaper with 'exhilarating headlines.'" If the *New York Times*' motto is "everything that's fit to print," I think the motto of the average suburban weekly is "everything that is positive."

So as soon as I saw it, I knew this was a rather extraordinary headline for that particular newspaper: "Glen Ellyn Man, Robbed of his Pants, \$7,000." Surely, in the

midst of the articles about Chamber of Commerce luncheons and church ham and bean suppers, this would have caught your eye, too. I can't even begin to unpack the images that went through my mind as I read this, or why, a psychiatrist would probably want to know.

"Glen Ellyn Man, Robbed of his Pants, \$7,000," opened up a whole new set of questions for me about my community. First, who is this man who has \$7,000 pants? I've been in Glen Ellyn a couple of years now, and I've never seen someone who looks like he's wearing \$7,000 pants, or is missing them—or is there someone in church today wearing \$7,000 pants that do not quite fit? When I read this story, it turned out that what gave the pants this incredible price tag was that they were filled with cash and poker chips. But what drew me in, of course, was the idea that somewhere, in this little town, was a man wearing pants that cost \$7,000.

Today's reading from Baruch plays with our fascination with clothing—the way in which clothing can enhance social status or economic place in society, or even who we are in our image. In the Old Testament they played with these images as much as we do, and in this one, the idea of clothing is used to make us understand how it is we're supposed to live a Godly life. To understand it, bear in mind that this particular writer was writing in the sixth century before Christ—six hundred years earlier. At that time, the Israelite people were living in exile and poverty in Babylon. During this time, they wouldn't have had much clothing; they wouldn't have had much in the way of material possessions. That makes these words all the more jarring: "Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting; for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven" (vv.1-3). That's a tough image for people in exile who didn't have much.

We're a far cry from those people, aren't we? In this country, we have more clothes than ever. Clothes made overseas are so cheap, you rarely hear of people lacking clothing. At my old church, we had a rummage sale, and after it was over we gave away bags of clothes for a dollar. People still picked over them and left a great deal behind. Later we called charities to see who could use the rest. They didn't want the picked over clothes. They wouldn't come get them. We ended up having to beg someone to take them, after we delivered them. To be worn? No, to be made into rags. There was not a clothing shortage in our town.

In fact, we use clothing for more than protection from the elements. We use it as a signifier. Some clothing even marks the season. Think of the Christmas sweaters we pull out, the Santa Claus ties. These garments are hardly essential items of clothing to protect us from wind and rain. These garments have meaning.

Some of us remember lectures from our parents. Were you ever told, "A sloppy outfit sends a sloppy message"? Or, "If you dress like you don't care about yourself, why should we?" Or, "What if you ended up in the hospital and they saw those dirty..." Well, you remember. Do you also remember your childhood rebellious thoughts in response to those lectures? You thought, "Why does it matter what I wear?" or "The outfit my parents think is ridiculous is actually exactly the way I'm supposed to dress." Maybe you wanted to dress in an outlandish way because that marked you as individual and special. Or maybe there's some genetic marker that all females in the human race carry that causes a mother, at the moment of childbirth, to believe that her daughter

looks good in pink, and every teenage girl to know it's not true.

The clothes we put on our bodies send complicated social messages. They are a form of self-expression, from the cultures that wear silks and saris to cultures that wear wool sweaters and kilts, miniskirts, or ski parkas. We don't just dress for practicality. Our clothing sends social messages.

Now given that preachers are actually psychic, I know that right now someone is thinking, "That is not true of everybody. Not everybody sends a social message with their clothing. For some of us, it's just a utilitarian, practical choice."

You may be the type of person who does not really care about fashion; it is simply a piece of cloth standing between you and the cold night air. You may have been the type who liked a school uniform, or would like to wear a uniform every day, just to keep things simple. But I would argue, even if you were that person who does not care about clothes, you live in a world and society that does.

I know a man who hates to dress up more than anything in the world. If he had his way, he would live every day in his favorite pair of old, ripped jeans and a soft, old T-shirt. But because of the world in which he works as a corporate attorney, Monday through Friday he has to dress up in what is to him a most torturous outfit: a suit, and shirt, and a tie. It's an expensive, conservative suit, because it's that kind of law firm. Every morning he puts on that tie and resents having to wear it and resents the money he had to spend on it, because that's money he could have spent on parts for the Chevy Impala he works on in the driveway.

So imagine his relief and delight when his "button-down" law firm introduced casual Friday. He was thrilled. He was ready. Only, you know what happened. "Work casual" in a law firm turned out not to include the jeans and T-shirts he had at home. It turned out that "work casual" on a Friday meant that this poor man had to do what he never wanted to do—go out and shop for an entire new wardrobe of clothes that were appropriate for casual Friday: perfectly creased khaki pants, polo shirts, and "dock-siders," all of which had to be kept stain-free.

Here's someone who didn't care about clothing, but was trapped in a world that does, where casual Friday created even more stress for him than "button-down" Monday through Thursday. All this because clothing is a symbol.

Well, the world of the ancient Israel, six centuries before Jesus lived, was not entirely different. They were not wearing suits or miniskirts; they didn't have the excess of clothing that Americans have, but their clothing said much about them and their social status. They were a nomadic people traveling in exile in another land. Clothing would even be a marker as to who their people were.

For us today, the link between clothing and social or economic status is a little shakier, isn't it? Not always so clear. Sometimes to watch the movie stars, it seems as though the wealthier Americans are, the less clothing they wear. Other times, we see the teenagers in affluent communities playing with the symbols of clothing by buying all their clothes in thrift stores and wearing recycled, secondhand clothes. This, of course, immediately identifies them to the world as being upper-middle-class suburbanites. I know, because this description fit me as a high-schooler.

For the Israelites, the link between clothing and social class would have been more obvious. It said exactly who you were. Clothing was absolutely precious, and even lifesaving. If you were a nomad in exile, whether or not you had a cloak to wear was the difference between life and death. Your clothing was literally your protection from

the elements. The Bible is full of imagery around the cloak, because for ancient people, that cloak was so much more important than any garment we have.

“Put on the cloak of righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory everlasting.” This was not mere fashion advice. It’s Godly life advice that uses that garment as a way to demonstrate that knowing God is not just a private or internal matter. It’s something that we wear, and thereby express to the world.

The presence and power of God has to be as much a part of how we express ourselves as the surely as the guy who shows up to the office party wearing a loud, Hawaiian shirt is telling the world he is ready to party; as surely as the guy who comes to the Halloween costume party wearing ordinary clothes tells the world he is not ready to party. As surely as that, our garment in God is how we identify ourselves in the world. The reason we are told to wear this “robe of God’s righteousness” is that it beats the alternative, which, according to Scripture this morning, is to wear a robe of sorrow and affliction. “Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of the righteousness, for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven.”

But first, you must take off the garment of sorrow and affliction. Anyone here who has ever suffered or has ever grieved knows what the garment of sorrow and affliction is, and you know that taking it off is a lot harder to do than a quick change of costume or a new fashion. The garment of sorrow is hard to take off, but some people are never able to take it off. Some people wear it so heavily.

Wearing the garment of sorrow and affliction forever is different from being a person who has suffered. Everybody suffers. Some people choose to wear the garment forever. When you meet these people, it’s as if they’re dressed in woe and despair, assured of sadness that won’t come off. It’s the first thing you notice about them when they walk into a room, as surely as you would notice a person who walked into a party wearing a vampire costume. So thick is the sadness that some people announce as their identity – and God knows this.

The garment of sorrow is not something that anybody would choose to be blanketed in. Nobody wants to be blanketed in sorrowful events. But what’s interesting in this reading is that the Scripture suggests that there is a point where you need to take that garment off – and to keep it on is spiritually damaging. God has in mind for us to dress up in something a little prettier.

Let’s be honest: we all wear some pretty ugly garments at one time or another. I’m not talking about the plaid pants with the striped shirt, but the ugly garment in the spiritual sense. We’ve all had moments in our lives where we’ve caught sight of ourselves in the spiritual mirror and realized we were wearing an ugly garment of greed or resentment, or a garment of “I told you so,” or a garment of “I’m above it all,” garments that are so knit and wrapped around us and the fabrics of the world, that weigh so heavily on us, we can hardly breathe. We’ve worn them for so long that we’ve forgotten what the Scripture reminds us: that we can wear something else instead. To this particular spiritual fashion quandary, God is saying, “take it off.”

Perhaps in this season of Advent preparation, you’re being called to a wardrobe change before Christmas. “Take off the garment of sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, for it is only a garment. Your sorrow is only a garment. There is a heavy cloth around your shoulders, but it is not who you are. You are meant to wear a more beautiful

robe—a robe of God with the diadem of glory. For you, in the image of God, are already beautiful.

Don't let anybody ever tell you that the garment of righteousness doesn't suit you. This is not like the fashion world, where someone says, "You can't wear that skirt; it's too short," or "That color is wrong for you." No. This is the garment that is right for everybody. "Dress up in me," God says, "because you are stunning and beautiful and magnificent. You are beauty queen, superhero, model, and movie star gorgeous all on your own—and here's the greatest part: with this garment, you don't have to go shopping—it's given freely.

The robe of righteousness, I'd suggest, is hanging in the back of the closet—even as we've been wearing the robe of sorrow and affliction. It's waiting there for us to put it on. But in order to put it on, we have to take off the old garment first.

I have no idea what any of you are wearing today, \$7,000 pants notwithstanding. You may be wearing a T-shirt, you may be wearing a dress, you may be wearing shorts, but I don't know what you're wearing in the spiritual sense. Only you know what garment you've carried in to church today – a garment of righteousness or sorrow—but God has fashion advice. Take off the garment of sorrow and affliction, and put on the beauty of the glory of God. And think for just a moment, friends, about Jesus, and how it was that God decided to come into the world – as a baby, absolutely naked, with no garment at all. So that we would know that the church has much more to offer than the mall and that when we dress up, we do it by God's grace.

This Advent, let's dress up in God, no matter the color of our socks, the height of our heels, whether or not our socks match or not. Dress up in the divine love, so that God can say, "You look marvelous." If you're still clinging to an old a garment of sorrow, or of sadness or of hurt that doesn't suit you, listen to the word in today's Scripture, where God says, "Take it off. It just isn't you."