

I.N.I.

Ash Wednesday
February 14, 2018
Joel 2:12-19/ Rev. 7:9-14

In Christ Jesus, who was stripped of His clothes on the cross, in order to shed His blood and cover our nakedness, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Our first parents in the Garden of Eden were naked and not ashamed. When Adam and Eve sinned and ate of the forbidden fruit, sin entered into the perfect creation and they became aware of their nakedness—they became ashamed—so they sewed together fig leaves together to cover their nakedness, their shame, and their sin.

Nakedness and shame are equated with sin in the Old Testament. Mankind has ever since tried to hide and cover up his sin with his own garments---with his own works. It does not work—it never does. After Adam and Eve were sent out of the garden, the first thing the Lord God did was clothe them with animal skins. Fig leaves were not good enough because they pointed to man's own efforts to pay the price for his sin. In reality, only God can cover sin, and He chooses to do so with a bloody sacrifice.

Our society is filled with one clothing store after another. We do love our clothes. Millions of dollars are spent on one style of garment or another. Can you imagine if there was only one clothing store selling only one style of clothing intended for all people? Such a thing would be absurd. How would we express our individuality? How would we survive wearing the same thing day after day?

But no matter how much clothes we buy and wear what are we really covering up? 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 our nakedness are in reality covering our shame. Adam and Eve sewed together fig leaves lest the Lord God see their shame, lest He discover their sin when He walked through the garden. It did not work. It was the wrong kind of garment.

Often we wear our beautiful clothes to hide our nakedness. In other words we believe we can deceive God and He will not take note of our shame and sin. We want to ourselves cover up our sin. It does not work. The Bible says our man-made garments are but filthy rags.

Our heart is filled with sin and shame. If the desires of our heart were laid bare for all to see, we would indeed be ashamed. Evil thoughts, sexual lusts, selfish wants, impure motives, jealousy, anger, envy, deceit, strife, idolatry. This is the condition of our heart, of our inner being, of our real nakedness that we seek to hide, to cover with our man-made clothing. Yet, we are not able, 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. 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 do it on our own always results in the same destination: dust. Born to die, we are dust, and to dust we shall return. No amount of beautiful clothes, or good deeds changes that.

It is into such a sorry spiritual state of affairs that the prophet Joel speaks. The people of Israel had wandered away from their God. They have been unfaithful in word and deed. They followed after 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 cries out, **“REND YOUR HEARTS AND NOT YOUR GARMENTS.”**

The ancient tradition was to express sadness and distress by tearing your garments, thereby revealing your great sorrow. But Joel knows that the rending/tearing 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 God’s presence.

Return to the Lord with repentant hearts. Put on sackcloth and ashes—repent!

So we have gathered here this evening to put on ashes, to repent of our sins. 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. Ashes remind us of our sin. They remind us of the condition of our hearts. But the sign of the cross reminds us of a gracious and merciful God.

We who are helpless and hopeless sinners are told in our text, **“RETURN TO THE LORD YOUR GOD, FOR HE IS GRACIOUS AND MERCIFUL, SLOW TO ANGER, AND ABOUNDING IN STEADFAST LOVE”** We, who can do nothing, have a God who has done everything. Ashes show us our sin; 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 filthy garments.

The cross—the device 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.

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!

That is our theme tonight:

SACKCLOTH AND ASHES TO ROBES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Listen to the words of our second text, the words of the Apostle John as he describes those who are gathered around the throne of the Lamb in His kingdom:

AFTER THESE THINGS I LOOKED, AND BEHOLD, A GREAT MULTITUDE WHICH NO ONE COULD NUMBER, OF ALL NATIONS, TRIBES, PEOPLES, AND TONGUES, STANDING BEFORE THE THRONE AND BEFORE THE LAMB, CLOTHED WITH WHITE ROBES, WITH PALM BRANCHES IN THEIR HANDS, AND CRYING OUT WITH A LOUD VOICE, SAYING, "SALVATION BELONGS TO OUR GOD WHO SITS ON THE THRONE, AND TO THE LAMB!" ALL THE ANGELS STOOD AROUND THE THRONE AND THE ELDERS AND THE FOUR LIVING CREATURES, AND FELL ON THEIR FACES BEFORE THE THRONE AND WORSHIPED GOD, SAYING: "AMEN! BLESSING AND GLORY AND WISDOM,

THANKSGIVING AND HONOR AND POWER AND MIGHT, BE TO OUR GOD FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN." THEN ONE OF THE ELDERS ANSWERED, SAYING TO ME, "WHO ARE THESE ARRAYED IN WHITE ROBES, AND WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?" AND I SAID TO HIM, "SIR, YOU KNOW." SO HE SAID TO ME, "THESE ARE THE ONES WHO COME OUT OF THE GREAT TRIBULATION, AND WASHED THEIR ROBES AND MADE THEM WHITE IN THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB.

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 in the most beautiful of garments. 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 dazzling white. Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.

Blackened, sin-filled, corrupt hearts covered by fig leaves and animal hides—that was the reason for our exile. Exiled from the presence of God, we repent in dust and ashes. We come before God with broken, sorrow-filled hearts. And God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God sends His Son in our place. Jesus endures the cross in our stead. Blood is shed, holy and precious blood that washes away and cleanses us 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 that the Bridegroom has provided for us, His Bride, Robes of Righteousness.

Thanks be to the LAMB!

Amen.