

Advent 3B
December 11, 2011
Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

Who are you wearing?

The Season for Fashion

John the Baptist understands himself to be a forerunner and herald of God's approaching kingdom. A witness to the light, the evangelist calls him. But we also remember John for his wild choice of clothing – a camel-hair tunic and leather belt after the style of the great prophet Elijah and in sharp contrast to the fine and expensive clothes worn by the Jerusalem elites who came to question him.

What we wear can speak volumes about us, our identities and our affinities. In this season of holiday parties, a lot depends on the impressions we make, and one of the first impressions taken of us people receive through what we are wearing. It was true when ZZ Top said it years ago and it's still true today – "every girl's crazy 'bout a sharp dressed man." The reverse holds true as well.

To add to the pressure, though, in certain circles it's not just *what* you wear, but *who* you wear. We affiliate ourselves with certain designers, certain brands and the style and sophistication they project. To walk into the party, looking great, wearing the right designer, projecting just the image you want makes a strong statement about yourself, your personal sense of style, elegance and sophistication and informs your friends, associates and especially your rivals that you've arrived, you're fierce and you have it all together.

The days of church clothes are gone

It wasn't too long ago when what a person wore to worship mattered, and people were expected to dress up when they went to meeting. A man would have work clothes and church clothes, and women would wear hats and even gloves with their Sunday dress. What's more, it seemed how to dress – in church and out in the world – was part of a child's Christian education. I remember more than a few conversations with Mom and Dad or with my Aunt where they explained why I had to wear my Sunday best when I wanted to dress in other ways.

Those days are gone for good, and except for a few fundamentalists out there on the fringe, I don't think anyone looks to the church for advice on how to dress, what to wear or even who to wear. And who could blame anyone for that. Pastors aren't usually known for their fashion sense. I thought one of the benefits of this job was I knew what shirt I was going to wear most every day and at any occasion. The pastor in the church I grew up in wore brown sandals with black socks and plaid pants.

With so much riding on how we dress and the image we project about ourselves, we can see how the church may seem out of touch and probably the last place you would turn for fashion

advice this holiday season. But then, in today's assigned readings, we find God talking through the prophet about the clothes God has purchased and lavished on God's people.

God gives us clothes to wear

Isaiah announces that God is in the process making over God's people. God has prepared a garland for God's people in exchange for the ashes they currently wear, a mantle of praise to wear instead of their faint spirit. Then a little later we learn that God clothes his people in a new garment – salvation -- and gives them a robe of righteousness to put on and wear with pride, and we get a sense of God's love and delight in God's newly outfitted people. Like a groom knocked breathless at the sight of his bride all decked out in wedding clothes, God adores God's people – glorious and beautifully clothed in God's salvation, wearing God's righteousness.

The grace of God – God's steadfast love, righteousness, reconciliation, healing, salvation – comes to us all as if they were garments to wear or accessories to complement our new wardrobe, ours by God's gift and God's love. For centuries, disciples of Jesus have understood their baptism as putting on Christ – his character, his love, his righteousness, his resurrection. So that the first impression we give, the image we project, the statement we make when we walk into is a room is Christ Jesus.

And maybe that's something we tend to lose sight of in our image, fashion and beauty conscious world. Who we are wearing does matter, and who we are called to wear is Jesus. God has made a brand new set of designer clothes tailored to fit us, and he has given them to us free of charge. Good clothes, quality clothes that never go out of style.

God's gifts are always fashionable

Style changes over time and each individual has their own sense of what's good and beautiful depending on what they want to say about themselves, but God's gifts are always fashionable. Suitable for formal or casual occasions and easy to mix and match for infinite variety. Love and compassion always go together, but some may be stunned by how might combine faith, hope and love with forgiveness, justice and mercy this year. Salvation and righteousness form a classic base for any child of God, but this year try decking it out with words of comfort, hope and the promise of God's love. I think you get the idea. We can put on Christ, revel in God's gifts and wear them with joy, pride, creativity, imagination ... and humility.

Not exclusive, but cutting edge

John the Baptist, they say, wore a camel-hair coat and leather belt as an act of fashion resistance. Choosing the prophetic garb of those who live on the edge of society and in stark contrast to the religious elites in the city who called attention to themselves, their wealth and their style with their fine clothes, all John says and does witness to the coming of God's kingdom. Even John's clothes and diet help him carry out his mission and calling – to bear witness to the light, to testify to Jesus and to the salvation, peace, and promise he gives through his death and resurrection. That's the kind of statement, God is calling us to make; to emerge new from the waters of our baptismal bath each morning and daily put on Christ and

head out into the world to announce the good news: God's kingdom is coming. And, to share the gifts we have been given with the people God has sent us to. God loves you, and God has given you the most beautiful wardrobe imaginable – salvation, righteousness, peace, steadfast love. Wear it with pride. Wear it with joy. And when people ask who you are wearing this holiday season, tell them about Jesus. Amen.