

# “A Royal Diadem”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – December 28, 2008*

First Sunday after Christmas

Galatians 3:27 – 4:7

Rev. John Wahl

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3, 10-12

Both of the scripture passages we read today use the image of getting dressed. In Galatians, we hear about being clothed with Christ – no matter whether male or female, Jew or Gentile, all become children of God through Christ. In Isaiah, the prophet speaks of being clothed in the garments of salvation; about God covering the Israelites with the robe of righteousness.

These are images, of course, mere representations of the reality of what God and Christ are for us. They are not like clothes that we put on only to take off and wad them up on the closet floor. These garments provide us with a life-giving warmth, protection and identity – they don't merely cover us, they also change us.

A couple of Sundays ago, when many of us put on costumes to make more real the presentation of the musical drama “Night of Wonder, Night of Joy,” there included a true attempt to transform. Women and men, children and adults, shepherd and angels and witnesses to the birth were represented through the simple garb of the day. Many chose to don headwear made of ropes and cloth, but no crowns. The royal diadem would be reserved for the child who would become king.

While Christmas is about the gift of a child, it also brings the long-expected arrival of the coming king. All through the season of Advent, our sanctuary was adorned in purple – which represents the royal expectations of the coming Prince of Peace and King of Kings. Despite the humble circumstances of Christ's birth, he is almost immediately recognized as the fulfillment and re-enactment of the Jewish monarchy. The Angels sing of his royal nature; the Magi from the East give gifts that are fit for a king; Herod feels threatened by the thought that someone might one day stake claim to his throne. The stage is set for Jesus to wear the royal diadem; to put on the crown of glory.

We know, of course, that the unbridled promises of Christmas come to tragic and ironic fulfillment in Holy Week. The royal diadem is replaced with the crown of thorns and the title “King of the Jews” is given to Jesus by the Roman soldiers who mock him and roll dice to see who would get to take home his clothes.

Why do we need a king? Where did this idea of God sending a king to offer us salvation come from? We hear voices about the need for redemption and salvation in the book of Isaiah as the prophet envisions a day when, by God's act and word, the now-desolate land will not only prosper, but will become a “crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.”

The Hebrew word for salvation – which is repeated not only in this passage of Isaiah but all through the prophets – is *yeshuah*. At the announcement of Christ’s birth, this noun becomes a name as the Angel tells Mary and Joseph that they are to name their child Jesus – God’s salvation personified. Much like those chosen people in our era who are named Prince or Faith or Apple, Jesus had never before been a name, only a noun. And as we have seen in the Old Testament, this salvation will be for all of those who are given God’s special garments – women and men, Jews and Gentiles, individuals and communities alike.

Isaiah tells us that God will remain active, engaged and attentive until Jerusalem has found its salvation. The mistakes of the past will be forgotten and new possibilities will come to pass. The prophet asserts that it was the sins of Israel that brought about the separation of the exile. But, God’s capacity to save Israel will prove greater than their capacity – and ours – to turn away from God. That is, God will not quit, once mobilized, until the social situation of the oppressed is altered.

The new community about to be enacted is as unexpected and wondrous as new growth that shoots up out of the ground. The same God who loves justice will create righteousness, which means that the situation of the oppressed, brokenhearted, captives and prisoners will be altered. God can and will reorder their social reality into a viable, equitable, working community.<sup>1</sup>

If God, the author and giver of salvation, has given us the garments of salvation, then why are we still in such need of hope? For Jerusalem, the time of exile had ended; for the oppressed Israelites in the days of Jesus’ birth, the time of waiting for a messiah also came to an end. But there have been more times of exile, more eras of oppression, more communities and individuals in need of God’s salvation. As we know, each and every community and individual has this need for God’s salvation – a need to know the hope that God can bring hope out of despair; that God will replace our ragged clothes with the garments of righteousness; that new life will sprout forth like a seed breaking through the barren ground.

“In 1945, in the wake of a world-rattling war, Ruth Kraus wrote this children’s book called *A Carrot Seed*. The book is as profound as it is brief. Although it would not have been described this way over sixty years ago, reviewers have described it as having “a Zen-like simplicity.” The boy plants the carrot seed. He tends to the weeds and gives water to the ground, but his family remains dubious. Then, one day, the carrot comes up – “just as he knew it would.” The carrot is larger than life; larger even than the boy.

The image of that carrot underscores the promise of bounty and growth for Israel in this week’s passage. It therefore also calls us to cross over the threshold of hope, where old wounds are healed, where impossibility yields to God’s ability to bring about something green from the cold ground. And it calls us to consider the new life that God has brought forth in Bethlehem.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann in *Texts for Preaching: A lectionary commentary for Year B*.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Nagy-Benson in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, vol. 1*.

Even before the birth of Christ, God's word had been made flesh in Isaiah's day through the laborers who rebuilt the temple and city of Jerusalem, in those worshipers who sang and prayed, in those prophets who proclaimed a living Word, and in those families who lived and loved in trust that the word of God already dwelt among them. Although it would be hundreds of years until the prophecies for the messiah, the King of Kings and Prince of Peace, would come to fruition in the child of Mary, the rebirth of Jerusalem after this exile showed God's active salvation. As with the Exodus, it showed that God moves and lives and works through those who are suffering, oppressed and in need of new life.

Salvation and righteousness, however freely given by God, is not something inherent to humanity, but something that is only granted by the grace of God in Christ. For those of us – and I'm sure some of us would fit this description – who struggle with feeling unworthy of God's grace, this can be an important message. At the nativity, when salvation was personified in Jesus, this gift became available – literally – once and for all. Never again will there need to be an Exodus where God rescues a nation and leads them to become a people, when before they were no people. In Christ, we have already been claimed and clothed by God. Salvation has already come.

Likewise, while many of us have or will experience personal exiles, never again will God's people have to wonder whether their God can follow them into a foreign land. In the Christmas story, we learn that Christ – who was present at the creation – is present throughout creation. Jesus' coming into the world shows that God in Christ will always be with us.

Christ is our King – the one worthy to be crowned with a royal diadem – because in him we discover hope. Hope is the knowledge, the belief, that nothing is impossible for God. We have been clothed with garments of salvation; Christ has brought us into the family of God so that we can be called sons and daughters. How can that be possible? It is only possible because it is of God's doing?

God's Son came into the world so that we might know salvation, "just as he knew it would." AMEN.