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Joel 2:12-19; Revelation 7:9-14  
“Heart to Heart: Sackcloth and Ashes to Robes of Righteousness”  
Year B – Ash Wednesday  
February 14, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Clothing is a commonplace thing. We take it for granted that in polite society, we are expected to wear clothes. In fact, it's the law! And what's more, our society also uses clothes to designate many things. Clothes may indicate your vocation, such as a soldier, a police officer, a nurse, a doctor, or even a pastor. Clothes may indicate your station in life, your finances, the type of work you do, or even what you expect the weather to be. We use and wear clothes for all sorts of reasons.

But clothes were not in God's original design at creation. Which is almost too difficult for us to imagine now, causing us to blush if we think about it for long. But before sin, there was no shame at nakedness. Now, this may sound strange at first, but the fact that we are wearing clothes indicates something deeply and profoundly wrong with our world. Where once, we could trust each other and had a perfect relationship with one another, now, sin has so corrupted our relationship with God, with one another, and with creation, that considering life without garments of some kind is inconceivable.

When sin entered the world, for the first time, nakedness brought shame. And Adam and Eve's first reaction once their eyes were opened in their sin, was to sew together some clothes from fig leaves, in an effort to protect themselves from each other, and from God. A barrier that previously was not needed, but now because of sin, was necessary. Clothes therefore became a tragic symbol of the depravity of our human condition.

And yet in this moment of the Fall, we find one of God's first acts of mercy toward Adam and Eve. Though He was in the process of banishing them from the Garden, He provided for them garments of animal skin. But still, those clothes were a constant reminder of everything they had lost.

Martin Luther writes, “Here Adam and Eve are dressed in garments by the Lord God Himself. Whenever they looked at their garments, these were to serve as a reminder to them to give thought to their wretched fall from supreme happiness into the utmost misfortune and trouble. Thus they were to be constantly afraid of sinning, to repent continually, and to sigh for the forgiveness of sins through the promised [Son]. This is also why He clothed them, not in foliage or in cotton, but in the skins of slain animals, for a sign that they are mortal and that they are living in certain death” (AE 1:221). “For you are dust,” God spoke to Adam after he sinned, “and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 1:19).

Today, not many think of clothes as a continual reminder of our sinful hearts and our own mortality. Instead, in our sinful twistedness, clothes can even be used to satisfy our own vanity, the great importance we attach to what we wear! And what's more than the garments that we place over our *physical* bodies are the garments we seek to place over our spirit and our heart. In

many different ways, we attempt to cover up the fact that deep down, we are corrupted. That our hearts are filled with sin. But as long as we keep up a certain exterior to the world, a certain perception that we're "okay" people, we think that we've fooled others, and that we've fooled God, and that we may have even fooled ourselves.

However, if the desires of our heart were truly laid bare for all to see, we would indeed be ashamed. Evil thoughts, sexual desires, selfish wants, impure motives, jealousy, anger, envy, drunkenness, strife, idolatry. But we put on the garments of a "righteous" exterior. Like Adam and Eve, we attempt to cover up our shame with garments that we have made for ourselves. But our man-made garments turn out to be nothing but filthy rags, making a bad situation even worse.

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. And all of our attempts to cover up our sin along the way results in the same destination: death and dust.

It is into such a sorry spiritual state of affairs that the prophet Joel speaks. The people of Israel have wandered away from God. They have been unfaithful in word and deed. They have sought other false gods and played the harlot. And as a result, the Lord will turn them over to disaster. They will be oppressed and downtrodden. They will suffer want and will weep in their distress.

That's when Joel calls out, "Rend your hearts and not your garments." The ancient tradition was to express terrible anxiety and distress by tearing your garments, showing your state of sorrow. But Joel knows that rending your garments will do nothing, except show even more clearly the problem: our corrupt and sinful hearts. Instead, the rending of a heart would be the first step toward healing the problem.

Rend your hearts and not your garments! Put on sackcloth and ashes, yes, but repent! Return to the Lord! 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. Repentance is a journey. A Lenten journey. A return from the exile of sin, if you will. Like that first set of clothing, our sin has separated us from our God *and* from one another. Sin is the dividing wall of hostility that destroys our relationship with God and others. Our sin has exiled us from the presence of the Lord. In repentance, we return to the Lord.

So we have gathered here this day to put on ashes, an outward sign of what we know lies within our blackened hearts. No attempt at false exteriors. We know our sin, and it is ever before us. We know that we, of our own strength and power, cannot return from our sin-stained exile. The ashes are a constant reminder, as Luther said, "that we are mortal and that we are living in certain death." But the ashes are also in the sign of the cross, which reminds us that God is a gracious and merciful God. It reminds us of the One who came on our behalf to overcome even sin.

We who are helpless and hopeless sinners are told, "Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13). We, who

can do nothing, have a God who was willingly to do everything. Ashes show our sin; but ashes *in 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 garments. The cross—the place where Jesus exchanged his status with ours, and was raised up in our stead. The cross—the place where Jesus was stripped of His robe and the sin of humanity was revealed, as He hung there naked. For He who knew no sin became sin for us. We may attempt to cover up our sin, but Jesus revealed it so that it might be washed away by His blood. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrow. And so ashes are placed upon our heads in the sign of the cross.

A gracious and merciful God has offered up His only-begotten Son, so that the sin, which had exiled us from His presence, might be washed away and we might be restored—a return from exile, a Lenten journey. And where does our journey end? Not at the cross, not even at the empty tomb; our journey ends in the courts of heaven!

Listen to the words of St. John as he describes those who are gathered around the throne of the Lamb in His kingdom:

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, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to 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 man-made rags. They are clothed in white robes, robes that have been cleansed, washed in the blood of the Lamb. Their garments of sackcloth and ashes have been exchanged for robes of righteousness.

Blackened, corrupt hearts, whether covered by fig leaves, animal hides, or ashes, are the cause of our exile. But this evening, we come before God, not with torn garments, but with torn hearts. And God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, provides His Son in our place. Jesus endures the cross in our stead. Blood is shed, holy and precious blood that washes away and cleanses all our sin. Our hearts are restored, and our sackcloth and ashes are exchanged for garments of salvation and robes of righteousness. The exile is over. Our journey has a clear destination in heaven. We are returned to the presence of our God, and we rejoice in the robes that Jesus has provided for us. In His name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

(This sermon is adapted from CPH materials for the series, *Return to Exile: A Lenten Journey* 2017.)