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Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Luke 2:22-40

A FASHION STATEMENT

Tonight is a time when people will get dressed up – some elegantly and some in rather bizarre outfits and they will wait. They will wait for a precise moment to greet what is depicted in drawings as a baby with a year written on its sash. Then, after a countdown, they may scream, sing, toast, kiss, blow horns, and/or light strings of firecrackers. Not long thereafter, the celebration will be over. It will be a new year, that frankly, will look a lot like the one that came before it.

Maybe they had no place else to go. Beyond the age to do significant physical work, beyond the age when many of their peers were still alive and active leaving them with limited social contacts, perhaps they were dressed up with no place to go other than to the temple. So Simeon stops by there on a hunch that there might be something of interest happening. Anna hangs out there on a regular basis as someone who was constantly in prayer. But as it turned out, Simeon and Anna were in the right place at the right time. They had been waiting for this moment, but they didn't know when it would come. If someone had snapped a picture, it might have been interpreted as simply one of those tug-of-the-heart-string moments that would appear to be a great-grandparent first holding a particular infant, with a gleam in their eyes. But Luke says something much more than a photo op was happening here.

First it is Simeon's turn. I'm not sure whether he stands chuckling with giddy joy or he gazes at the infant child in his arms with tears streaming down his cheeks or perhaps he is lost in transfixed wonder. Whichever, he sees something very special in the child and declares he is ready to depart the struggles of this life in peace. Mary and Joseph had brought the baby Jesus to

the temple in Jerusalem following the Jewish practice of the ritual purification of a mother after childbirth combined with the dedication of a child unto God.

That kind of ceremony must have taken place quite frequently there at the temple. If Simeon had spent any time there previously, he would have seen a regular flow of parents bringing their infant children for such observances. Yet, this child seemed to be different and some internal bells and whistles must have been going off in Simeon's head or heart. Even so, it was just a little child with parents who happened to be willing for an older man to hold in his arms this powerless, speechless newcomer to the world. From the description of the pair of turtledoves Mary and Joseph offered on this occasion, it is clear that they were poor. A family of greater means was instructed to offer a lamb. Yet, Simeon saw something very special in this poor child, even with the limitations poverty would hold for his future. Whatever this baby might accomplish at this point was still only a promise and a hope. Whatever teaching he might offer would remain hidden for years. Nothing had happened yet. Herod still sat on the local throne and Caesar controlled things from afar. The world looked as it did before. But Simeon stood there in grateful wonder. Somehow, it was the future he was holding in his hands. He had seen and touched it. He was satisfied. It was, as he said, enough.

Then it is Anna's turn. She too was older and approaching the end of her days. Her name meant grace and she had experienced it from a God who had provided for her even though she was a long-term widow. She also experienced grace in a special way that day in the outer court of the temple. In touching Jesus, she had touched tomorrow in all its God-given promise and she added her own joy and praise to the moment that Simeon had experienced. For the rest of her life, she'd be telling everybody about this baby whom she saw for just a few minutes.

By the time a fully-adult Jesus comes onto the stage of history, Simeon and Anna would be long dead. In an age of shorter life spans than we experience today, it is also likely that the shepherds who came to see the child in the

manger would have died in the thirty years or more that would pass before the gospel story gears up in the ministry of Jesus. Perhaps some or all of the magi who figure in the other birth narrative over in Matthew would have died in that period of time as well. In the meantime, they who saw the baby, they who knelt at the stable or laid their tributes before him would not know what became of him. They would know only what they had heard and seen back then.

In a way, we too are people who have seen something, even something heart-warming, but not its full unfolding. We find ourselves in a similar situation with the shepherds, the magi, Simeon, and Anna. Like them, we have the scriptures that school us in hope and attentiveness. We have stories and covenants and signs. We have moments, or the memory of moments, when the tender compassion of our God has come close enough to see and feel. We have something like the shepherds would have had, recalling all their lives a night of mysterious glory, or like what the magi brought back to their homelands, a vision of a different kind of ruler and reign. Their eyes had seen the true glory of Israel, the light for the nations. We have that as well, though for us the world has resumed its accustomed form and, in the light of day, it seems largely unchanged in its misplaced priorities and injurious practices.

You may say that unlike Simeon and Anna, we know the full story of Jesus. However, at least Simeon seemed fairly well clued-in on the purpose of his coming and the sorrowful conflict that would accompany his mission. We, like these two, who had been waiting a long time for the coming of this Messiah, are waiting as well for the fulfillment of our spiritual longings.

There were other people described in scripture who had been waiting for a long time to see their spiritual hopes fulfilled. The exiles who were being held in Babylon longed to return to Jerusalem. Finally, they were freed to set off for the city of their heritage and their dreams, uplifted by the prophets' comforting and hopeful words. Yet, when they got to Jerusalem, they found it in ruins.

They were poorly protected from the elements, poorly clothed and poorly fed. Israel had nothing to wear, no word from God and nowhere to go.

Yet, our Old Testament passage describes a remarkable transformation. God is described as actively dressing the people for the occasion like a bride or a groom on the big wedding day, on which there is an elegant proclamation of salvation. The God who loves justice alters the circumstances of the oppressed and brokenhearted. They had feared that their long separation from their special religious places and practices might have led to an end of their relationship with God. When they saw the distressing condition of their beloved city, they wondered whether God had taken a hike. But they discovered that there had been no divorce between God and God's people. To the contrary, they were being prepared for a grand and glorious wedding with ongoing committed love, where even death couldn't part the partners.

Weddings usually call for special clothing. God the divine tailor, decks Israel in what Isaiah indicates is somewhat akin to a tuxedo of salvation and a wedding dress of righteousness. At various places in scripture, we get to see the divine tailor at work. After Adam and Eve's sin, God graciously makes them garments of skin to clothe them. They no longer need to hide or be ashamed. The divine tailor is at work again taking the smelly rags of shepherds and the swaddling clothes of a child in Bethlehem and with such raw material, fashions a wedding dress of salvation and righteousness for humankind. The prodigal son returns to his father filthy, but the father in the parable, lovingly dresses him in the best robe. That is the way God tends to dress even those of us who more rightly deserve to be in sack-cloth and ashes.

God's purpose in all of this is much larger than a lesson in clothing design and fashion. This is not a message beholden to GQ or Vogue magazines. I ask us instead as we are about to enter 2018 to take a look at how our spirits are dressed. Simeon and Anna were outfitted in devotion, dedication, prayer, openness to the Holy Spirit, and expectation of the fulfillment of God's promises. None of that was a 'put on,' so spiritually, we can say that they had

the absolute finest attire. That sad statement “all dressed up and nowhere to go,” was not descriptive of them at all.

We are at a time when many have no basis for their hope other than turning the page of a new calendar. At a time when many will be making New Year’s resolutions that may not last the week, I encourage us to allow the One who is not limited by time to newly adorn us in spiritual attire. For God can clothe us with what scripture calls the garments of salvation. We can be covered with the robe of righteousness as we await the next steps in the fulfillment of God’s plan. Are we ready to see indications that the God who is committed to love and justice is shaping the future in exciting ways? Are we ready to see the promise of the divine hand at work in something as ordinary and special as a baby? Let’s make sure we are figuratively dressed up, because we’ve got somewhere to go. For where we are going is to God’s future. It is not just a new year; it is a new day with light that spreads all over God’s world. All thanks and praise be to our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, now and forevermore. Amen.