Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Good Friday
April 18, 2025
Meditation by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
His robes for mine

—Galatians 3:10-13

The topic comes up several times throughout the history of our Lord's passion. It's one of those little details that is easily overlooked, and yet it's important enough to be mentioned repeatedly by the Gospel writers. It is the subject of clothing.

When Caiaphas, the High Priest, held Jesus for trial, and he heard Jesus confess that he is the Son of God and will come again in glory on the clouds of heaven, Caiaphas tore his clothes and accused Jesus of blasphemy. By tearing his robes, Caiaphas wanted everyone to see how deeply offended he was by Jesus' words (even though Jesus spoke the truth). Then they brought Jesus before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Pilate sent him to Herod, who was visiting Jerusalem but had jurisdiction over Jesus' home region of Galilee. Herod and his soldiers mocked Jesus and dressed him in an elegant robe and sent him back to Pilate. Then Pilate had him flogged. Jesus' back was laid bare. The cruel Roman whip turned our Savior's skin into ribbons of shredded flesh. Then the soldiers put a purple robe on him and pressed a crown of thorns onto his head. They knelt down and mocked him. Pilate presented Jesus to the people wearing the robe and the crown and said, "Here is the man!" Then they put his own clothes on Jesus and led him out to be crucified. At Calvary Jesus was stripped of all dignity. As Jesus hung on the cross the Roman soldiers divided his clothing among themselves and cast lots for his undergarment. In painting and sculpture Jesus is depicted wearing a loincloth, but that is for artistic modesty, not historical fact. Crucifixion was a degrading, shameful way to die.

Which raises an important question: Why do human beings wear clothes? You might say, "We wear clothing to stay warm." There's truth to that. If you're into names like Gucci and Versace and Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger, you might say, "We wear clothing to make a fashion statement, to project an image." And for some people there is indeed truth to that, as well. But there is a more fundamental reason human beings wear clothing, more basic than warmth and style. Very simply, we human beings wear clothing to cover our shame. Clothing is a consequence of sin and living in a sinful world. Before they rebelled against God, Adam and Eve had no need of clothing; they felt no shame. When they ate the forbidden fruit in the garden and disobeyed their Maker, their eyes were opened and they realized they were naked. After God confronted Adam and Eve, and they realized that the fig leaves they had made for themselves were completely inadequate, God himself made clothing for them from animal skins. The first time something died in God's perfect world was a direct result of Adam and Eve's sin. In order to cover their shame, blood was spilled and life was lost. We wear clothing because we live in a world that has been ruined by sin.

But there's more to this matter of clothing than just the clothes we wear on the outside. Scripture speaks of the clothing we wear before God. God doesn't care how fine your outward clothes are. He doesn't look at the name-brand labels you wear. He doesn't care about the sports emblems on your garments: Whether it's Vikings or Twins, Packers or Brewers, Cardinals or Diamondbacks, Sun Devils or Wildcats or any other. He doesn't care whether you wear a tuxedo or a tee-shirt or a tank top. He sees right through your outer garments, whether you put your best clothes on for Sunday worship or for a wedding or special occasion, or you wear old clothes for work around the house. God sees how you are dressed in a very different way.

God sees you as being dressed according to what you have done or failed to do. He sees you, figuratively speaking, as dressed in sin or clothed in righteousness, as morally naked or appropriately dressed to stand in his presence. And this is where we human beings have a huge natural problem. Our moral acts of kindness and goodness, our own good works, our own righteous acts are completely inadequate to clothe us before God. The Prophet Isaiah writes, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). Our very best efforts to be good citizens, good spouses, good parents, good employees, good students, good children—our very best efforts to be "good people"—still leave us dressed in tattered, filthy rags, unable to stand before God on the day of judgment. Jesus said, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). So where can we get that righteousness? How can we stand before God dressed in good works that are so pure and so perfect that we are worthy to stand in the presence of a holy God? By trying harder? By doing better? By giving more? By loving more? No! The tattered rags of our own righteousness cannot be mended!

Enter Jesus. The Son of God enters our world, and he says, “Brother, sister, I will be your righteousness. I will step in and become your obedience.” Jesus says, “I will keep the commandments you have broken. All of them. My thoughts will always be pure. My actions will always be right. My love will always be perfect.” And that’s what he did. For 33 years he lived under God’s holy law and fulfilled it perfectly. He was tempted in every way, just as we are, but he was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). And on that Good Friday, as he walked to Calvary, those were the clothes he wore before God. He wore a robe of perfect righteousness before his Father. He went to the cross as a Lamb without spot or blemish or defect, perfect in every way, the innocent sacrifice and Substitute for sinners.

On the cross God did something that even the Roman soldiers could not do: He stripped Jesus of his perfection. He stripped Jesus of his robe of righteousness, and the Father in heaven dressed Jesus in different clothes. God clothed his Son in the stench of your sin, in the tattered rags of my wickedness, in the ugly garments of the guilt of the world. He treated his own Son as the vilest of sinners, and he condemned him to the depths of hell in our place. And what did God do with that perfect obedience that Jesus had earned? What did God do with the robe of righteousness that he stripped off of Jesus? He gave it to you! He draped it around you to cover your sin and the rags of your righteousness. He clothed you with Jesus’ perfection, so that before God you stand beautifully dressed. Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). That is the great exchange that we solemnly observe this Good Friday. His robes for mine!

On this Good Friday, ponder the words of Isaiah: “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53). Reflect on the words of the apostle: “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’” As you reflect, as you ponder this great mystery of God’s infinite love for you, don’t tear your clothes as the high priest Caiaphas did, in an outward show of indignation. Tear your heart in genuine repentance, grieving over your sin that sent Jesus to the cross, and holding on to his righteousness. That’s the robe of righteousness that was given to you in your Baptism. That’s the robe of righteousness you wear every day before God, as you trust in Jesus as your Savior. It’s the white robe of a saint, given to you by the Son of God himself. His robes for mine! Amen.