

## NEW CLOTHES FOR CHRISTMAS

Isaiah 61:10-11

What did you get for Christmas? Perhaps it was the toy you really wanted-- a new laptop or an i-Phone or a fishing rod or a doll. Maybe you got the bottle of perfume, the homemade ornament or the family portrait. But one thing we often get at Christmas is new clothing— designer jeans, a warm sweater, a bright tie, warm socks and mittens, or a winter parka. Clothes are great as long as they match the colors we like, fit properly, and are at least somewhat in style. So what new clothes did you get this Christmas?

Our Old Testament lesson speaks about clothes:

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Isaiah compares the new life God has given to us with a pair of new clothing. On Christmas we celebrate how Jesus came to our world to bring us salvation. Jesus has given us a new set of clothes for Christmas!

But are those the clothes we want? What were we really looking for this Christmas? A vacation out of the cold Mid-west? The opportunity for the extended family to get together despite the pandemic? A chance to cozy up by a fireplace and enjoy some good home cooking? Some of “the old Christmas spirit?” What new clothes did we get for Christmas?

In the famous children’s story “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” the emperor asks his designers to provide him with a new wardrobe for an upcoming public appearance before his subjects. In their fear of trying to pick just the right clothes, the designers come up with the brilliant idea of having the emperor wear no clothes at all. They figure that if they make a big enough fuss about it, the emperor won’t notice. The emperor processes naked, but the people are too afraid to tell him what they think about his new “clothes.” He perceives their shock as amazement of how great his clothes are. Then one innocent child cries out, “But he has nothing on.” The emperor then realizes his nakedness and tries to cover up in horror.

So what about our new clothes for Christmas? Are they real or are we only convincing ourselves to be cheery and happy for the holidays? Is there truly something new that awaits us this Christmas, or are we only deluding ourselves? Is Christmas just a chance for us in a world of Covid-19, many out of work, broken families and lost friendships to pretend that everything is okay? Are we truly getting new clothes for Christmas, or are we only fooling ourselves like that emperor?

A missionary family in Zambia, Africa, celebrates Christmas each year in a land where there is no snow, no shopping malls with Santa, no Christmas lights displays, no special sales, and no Christmas TV specials. In fact Zambia, which is mostly desert, has no pine trees. So that father of this family takes the three children out each year and goes looking with great enthusiasm for a thorn tree. Their Zambian friends gather to watch as these strange people cut down a thorn tree despite scratches they receive from the thorns. They amuse themselves as they hear the family explain why they drag the tree into their house and place it into bucket. As the people see it, this ranks up there with why the father blows his nose into a white cloth, then carefully wraps it up and puts it in his pocket. But the people have learned that all this fuss revolves around the coming of Jesus. And they stop by the family's house bringing presents of a chicken or figs and say, "Mwana munu wa iy al," which means, "The Son of Man has come."

The new clothes Christ offers us for Christmas do not depend on how well we've decorated the tree, baked the cookies, finished the semester, or wrapped up the presents. Our job is not to provide the perfect Christmas. We don't make Christmas happen by how well we put ourselves into a Christmas spirit. Christmas is Jesus coming to our world, not about how well we celebrate that fact. As Isaiah says, "I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation and arrayed me with a robe of righteousness." The emphasis is not on the rejoicing, but on the God who gives us a reason to rejoice. That's the new clothes Christ offers us for Christmas—clothes that are perfect and complete and real because they depend on Him, not how we feel this Christmas.

But do we want those new clothes? You might ask, "What kind of question is that?" The rock group "ZZ-Top" sung about "Every girl's crazy about a sharp dressed man." We have all heard the expression, "The clothes make the man." Who of us would dare go to an office job interview dressed in ripped jeans and an old t-shirt? If God is offering us something "new and improved," why wouldn't we want it?

Isaiah compares those new clothes with the clothes given to a bride and groom for a wedding. "As a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest and as bride adorns herself with her jewels, so the LORD God will make righteousness and praise spring before all nations." God isn't just giving us new clothes: he is giving us a new relationship. He isn't giving us \$5 worth, a small dosage to make us feel a little better. No, for Christmas he has given us the whole thing. The new clothes are not a 5 second change like Superman in a phone booth, but a constant, daily commitment to Him. The new clothes are not just for December 25th; they are for the other 364 days each year. So do we want those new clothes?

I think we've all had some articles of old clothing we hated to get rid of—a pair of jeans with more holes than denim, a flannel shirt with no buttons, an old leather jacket, a tattered sweater. We don't want to give them up because they are familiar, comfortable. We are accustomed to them. New clothes, by contrast, can seem stiff and uncomfortable.

The new clothes Jesus offers to us on Christmas can seem uncomfortable—like wearing a new pair of shoes. We have grown accustomed to our old life. We find ourselves constantly

tempted to get out and work really hard so that we can prove to our families, to our friends, to our bosses, to God, and especially to ourselves that we are good. So we expect people and God like us because we are good. And when people say we have a hole in our clothes—when they point out that we are not so good—then we lash out and try to defend ourselves. We hang on to the old clothes of proving ourselves, instead of receiving the new life Jesus offers to us—a life that is built on trust—a life that realizes that why God loves me is not because I’m so good, but because God is love. And because God loves, my fellow Christians can love me for the same reason.

Christmas is the realization that we need new clothes. It is not a quiet break from life; it is coming to grips with what life is truly all about. As we heard in the “interruption,” Christmas is not an interruption from reality, but an interruption that turns us back to reality. Our old clothes, our old life will perish. And we would too. We need new clothes—the clothes that only God can give us. We need Christmas because we need the God, Christ Jesus, who comes to us on Christmas.

What did you want for Christmas? Christ Jesus came on Christmas so we never have to want anymore. He offers us new clothes that will never fade or rip or tear or wear out. His package awaits us each day. God bless you this Christmas season, in 2021, and every day as we open the present He has for us.