Isaiah 61:10–62:3

Other Lessons: Psalm 111; Galatians 4:4–7; Luke 2:22–40

For most people around this time, the Christmas mood has much subsided, except maybe those who are still living in the Boxing Week. But the church continues to sing, continues to praise, and continues to exult the Christ who has come in the flesh. Thus our readings for today are filled with praises and hymns and you can that joy that does not end, especially for Simeon, it is a joy that he can take even to the grave because not even the grave can stop his mouth and heart from praising God. We see this joy already proclaimed 700 years in Isaiah and the images that is used here is very interesting, it is about wearing clothes, the right kind of clothing of course.

I still remember a few years ago on a trip to Malaysia during the summer with my wife and her whole family, visiting their side of the family there. And one of the tourist attraction there is the Kuala Lumpur Tower in that capital city. The tower looks very similar to the CN Tower here except that it's shorter. The CN Tower (553m) is the 3rd tallest in the world while the KL Tower (421m) is the 7th. In any case, we went up there for lunch and my brother in law and myself were not allowed to enter the restaurant. We were not allowed because we were both wearing shorts. I guess the restaurant is too high class for people like us who show our hairy legs.

But that's the condition we are in spiritually and even physically. Yes we all wear clothes all the time, that's what makes us "civilized" but we were all born naked, we came into this world with nothing. How much more of our spiritual condition when we share in that fateful event in the fall of our first parents. They were naked all along and they were in perfect harmony with God and one another. But after they doubted, defied, and disobeyed, they lost something. They lost something that they became so ashamed that they had to hide themselves from one another and from God. That something they lost is called righteousness and now filled with unrighteousness. It is everything that is contrary to God, his will, and his nature. And so Isaiah later in chapter 64 would say that all our righteous deeds, all the things that we think are good and wonderful and deserve much praise and honor, all of them says Isaiah are as polluted garments (or filthy rags as both the NIV and KJV have it), which is already a dumbed down translation of the original word in Hebrew, which is far worse than a piece of dirty of clothing.

This is a terrible thing for it is not just an idea or concept but it is a demand that pretty much fills every other page of the bible. And Luther himself in his later years reflecting on this confessed that he hated it. He hated the idea of righteousness, he hated the demand of it, and the worst of it is that he hated the one who demands it for it is God who demands it, according to God's standards. Who can escape? Who can even come close to doing it? And so Luther described his miserable life as a monk loathing and being driving to deep despair for he could not attain this righteousness of God, which would only earn him utter wrath and punishment from God. That is the righteousness of God, or in other words, that is God's justice.

My story at the KL Tower actually has a good ending. We were not kicked out but eventually were allowed to enter and enjoy our lunch there. The restaurant there was prepared for this kind of situation as the receptionist there actually gave us 2 large sheets like the size of a large towel and we were able to tie it around the waist and our legs were covered. It felt really strange because it looked just like a skirt and I really wish I could show you some pictures but I don’t have them anymore. And I think it was a buffet lunch so that we both walked around with this skirt like thing around us. As long as I could enjoy the food, I didn’t really care how I looked like at that time.

How much more when the one who has prepared the heavenly wedding banquet high above all human achievements is God himself? How can he have everything ready and have no guests? If he is prepared then he must prepare for everything, even more prepared than that restaurant on top of the KL Tower. For he has clothed us with garments of salvation, a robe of righteousness. We see that foreshadowed already in the opening story of Adam and Eve. They were not left naked with shame the rest of their lives. They were not left with the skimpy fig leaves that they sewed together in a hurry. Those were just pathetic coverings that cannot hide their shame and guilt and nakedness. But it was God who made for them real clothing that can cover them, real clothing that showed them that God still cared for them, real clothing that perhaps still smelled of blood reminding them of death, but not their own and pointing forward to a greater sacrifice whose blood covers all of their children.

Here Isaiah can boldly rejoice and proclaim that God has clothed him and indeed all believers because it comes from the messiah, Jesus. Isaiah can claim it as his because the promise from God is sure even though it had not yet happened in his lifetime. This robe of righteousness is none other than the righteousness of Jesus. His perfect obedience to the law and the will of God, his perfect and sinless life, all of it become ours and he became naked, shamed, and he died.

Nevertheless for Isaiah it was still a future event, something that he would not see, something that he can only claim as a distant promise, but not so for us. Jesus came, he died and rose again, but we can truly claim to be clothed in this garment of salvation, in this robe of righteousness because of baptism. It's interesting that Paul often describe the Christian as being baptized INTO Christ, so that he can say in Galatians 3:27 that "as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. In baptism then we can say in confidence that God has clothed me with the garments of salvation and covered me with the robe of righteousness. This is something of faith, for the world will not see it, neither do we. But when Christ returns, when we are brought to the wedding banquet, then we will see, the whole world will see the righteousness, the glory, the beauty that is over us.

And so we continue to rejoice in this short season of Christmas. The Christmas joy does not come from big parties or the nice and jolly Christmas songs, or the exciting things of life, in fact we should not confuse it with an emotion (usually of being happy and/or being excited), but rather it comes first of all in the knowledge of the Christ who clothes us with salvation, the Christ who covers our shame and guilt, the Christ who dies for us. We rejoice because we have the righteousness of God, the full glory of God, the perfection of God, though for the moment we can only see it with faith. And now we are about to enter a new year and probably it will be just like any other year. But we continue to remember our baptism, that whatever we may face in this new year, good or bad, we are in Christ, covered by him, so that in good things we give thanks to him, in the bad things we cling tighter to him for help and strength, in both we still rejoice for heaven is ours.