

## **“Baby Clothes” Colossians 3:9-17**

One of the things I love about our Christmas at Westminster is the beautiful Christmas trees which decorate the sanctuary and our facility. It is a tradition which started here in the 1970's, with some women of the church who made our first Christmas ornaments. These are special ornaments are symbols of Jesus Christ. They are physical images which remind us of Christ. Some come from prophecies of the Old Testament, some from the life of Jesus, some from his teachings. Some are monograms of his name, and some come from images of Christ after his resurrection and ascension. The reason we have so many different symbols is that one is not enough. Our human minds can't comprehend all of the meaning and majesty of Christ's coming into the world, and so we use images to capture a part of the meaning – a star to remind us of his birth, a cross to remind us of his death, or a butterfly to remind us of the resurrection, and many more which remind us of Christ and the meaning of his arrival on earth.

Images and metaphors help our human minds envision the divine. In our Colossians reading from the New Testament today, there is such an image which helps remind us of new life in Christ. We are called to strip off our old clothes and put on new ones, like putting on a new life. This image may not be as potent to us as it was to people in biblical times. We change our clothes all the time. You may even have gotten some new ones for Christmas. I know I change my coat with the weather and the style of clothing I am wearing. Biblical people had just one set of clothes they wore every day. The one cloak they had was with them all the time and it said who you were. It was intimate to them. It was part of their identity.

I tried to think of a modern image of something as intimate as that cloak. The front of the Harbinger this week reminded me of Peanuts, and I thought of Linus with his blanket. He always had to have it with him. I gave a helping hand in the nursery during the first service on Christmas Eve, and there were plenty of babies who were carrying around their blankets with them. When they left, we had to make sure that each one took the right blanket home, for as one mother said, they couldn't sleep without it. This image of clothing in Colossians was intimate like that, and yet we were called to throw off the old and put on the new. As we approach the new year, this was the scripture chosen for us to read as we head on into the new year. Today I want us to look at who the message of the passage is addressed to, what the message is, and how it is to help us make changes in our lives.

First of all, to who is the message directed? When my children were little, I would always ask them what they learned about in Sunday School, and their answer would most often be, “Jesus.” In “It's Elementary!” or in Children's Church if I ask who something refers to, it is often a good bet to answer, “Jesus,” or “God.” There was a minister who was giving a children's sermon, and he told

the children he was going to describe something, and he wanted them to see if they could tell what it was. He said, "It is furry and gray, has a bushy tail, collects acorns and nuts, and lives in a tree. What is it?" One little boy raised his hand and said, "It sounds like a squirrel, but I'm sure the answer is 'Jesus.'"

Today's scripture reading talks about a "holy one," "chosen and beloved." If I hadn't given you a heads up, and I asked you who this was talking about, you would probably answer, "Jesus," - but you would be wrong. The "holy one," "chosen and beloved" is you. Not just "you all," but "you," specifically. "You," who chose to sit in that particular pew today. "You," who are listening to this sermon. Even "you" who are daydreaming or doodling. "You," are God's "holy one," "chosen and beloved," to whom this scripture is directed. This intimacy reminds us of our status as God's adopted children. We are brothers and sisters of Christ. The lectionary lists this scripture to be read the Sunday after Christmas. Maybe it is read to remind us that the intimate family of the stable in Bethlehem is our family. Because of that baby born into a family, we become family. We are children of God, loved as much as Mary loved her child, "holy ones," "chosen and beloved" as is God's own son. You, beloved child of God! It is to you whom this message is given. You are the one called to give up your old life, and to clothe yourself in the new, as a response to that love which surrounds you.

So, secondly, let us answer the question of what this new life is that we are to cloth our selves with. Paul gives us a list. We are to have compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, peace and love. These attributes reminded me of the Christmas story. The compassion and kindness are like that shown by the inn keeper who found room for a needy couple in his stable. The humility is like that that Mary showed when she heard that she was to carry God's son. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord." The meekness reminded me of the shepherds who cowered in the fields with the angels overhead, and then came on bended knee to the Christ child. We are called to have patience, as did God's people while they were waiting for the Messiah, like the patience shown by the prophets Simeon and Anna who waited in the temple for this day to arrive. We are called to show forgiveness, like Joseph must have shown when he first heard that Mary was expecting, and before the angel came to reassure him in a dream. We are to show love, like the unconditional love Mary and Joseph felt for their baby, the kind of unconditional love a baby shows to its parents. This is also the unconditional love that God showed to us when God's only begotten son was sent into the world for our sakes. The peace of the passage is like the peace we felt as we lit candles and sang together on Christmas Eve, as we remembered God's wonderful gift to us.

So, thirdly, we have a list that describes the new life we are to put on like a new set of clothes. How do we do it? While we sit here, it sounds good, but how do we carry it out? How do we remember to live this way? How do we keep it up from day to day? The answer is very easy - and very difficult. As the scripture tells us, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." How do we do that? Maybe

I should have had a refrigerator magnet made for each of us so we could look at the list each day. This is not the only list of Christian attributes that Paul gave. In "It's Elementary!" and "Tweens, we are getting ready to learn the "fruits of the Spirit," and we are going to use a song to memorize them. Maybe that would be a good idea for each of us. Jewish families often have a mezuzah, a small box that they nail to their front door frame. Inside is some scripture, and each time they go in and out of their house they touch the box to remind them to keep God's word close to their hearts. This is why Hassidic Jews dress so oddly, and have so many rules. It is so that each time they do something, with each action taken, with each ritual done differently, they are reminded that they are to be God's people.

So how do we stay observant so that the "word of Christ dwells" in us richly? As the scripture tells us, we are to learn God's word, and teach it to others, and sing hymns and psalms and spiritual songs. This kind of remembrance takes time and vigilance and effort in the midst of our modern lives. It means that we have to be willing to take time, and to make an effort so that God's word is the first, and most central thing in our lives – not our soccer team, or our swimming practice, or our jobs, or our paychecks, or our computers, or the internet, or dance lesson, or our television shows, or our sports team, or our hobby. Not baseball, or our music, or our money, or our video games. None of these can become the center of our lives.

I have been a parent, and know what it is to drive my children somewhere different each day. For us it was usually play practice or scouting. None of these things listed above are bad things, but we have to work, and to spend time and a conscious effort to make sure that they all extend from Christ as the center. We need to work to make sure that God underlies all that we do. The scripture tells us to "Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart." "Let the word of God  dwell in you richly." "Clothe yourselves with the new self." As those bands of cloth were wrapped around and swaddled the baby Jesus, as those poor cloths became his baby clothes, so too we are to be wrapped and swaddled tightly in God's word as if it were new clothes which we put on each day. With Christmas and the Chrismon trees, we are surrounded by images of God's love for us. As the new year approaches, let us remember that baby, newly wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger. Let us focus on our actions like they were new clothes, and take off the old, and put on the new.

The message is meant for you, God's "holy one," "chosen and beloved," made part of God's family by God's love for you. You are called to live in ways the Christmas story reminds us of, with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love and peace. We are to do so by making God's word the center and ruler of our lives. It is to surround us like new clothes. I should envelop us. It should be the thing from which every action, and deed, and our jobs, and our school, and our hobbies, and our relationships flow.

This is the New Year's message which Paul gives us in today's lesson.  
"Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,  
giving thanks to God the father through him."

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