

“Put Some Clothes On!”

March 1, 2020
Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 3:8-17

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Everyone knows the Hans Christian Andersen story of “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” A couple of smooth-talking salesmen convince an insecure and ego-centric king that he has just purchased the most exquisite ‘haute-couture’ outfit ever stitched together by human hands. Only those who are “hopelessly stupid” or “unfit for their position” can’t see the beautiful clothes.

In reality, of course, the weavers have stripped the Emperor bare and he is parading around buck naked! Yet the Emperor is so convinced he is wearing royal robes that none of his servants will dare tell him the truth. It is not until a little child blurts out the fact, “But he isn’t wearing anything at all!” that the Emperor sees and grasps his state of undress.

Our scripture reading today from Colossians tells us that sometimes we think we are better dressed than we actually are — and that it’s time for us to put on some new clothes.

Every December 31st people like to make “New Year’s Resolutions.” We “resolve” to quit smoking, to cut out the carbs, to spend more quality time together. We genuinely want to make good changes in our lives, to “put on” a new, fresh way of living. Lent is another time when people try to make a specific change — to get rid of bad habits by giving up something or to make good habits by taking on something positive. (I actually think it is better than New Year’s because you can tell yourself that you only have to make this change for 6 weeks!) We are better at making a change for a limited time. But once the limited time is up, we often find the new habit is permanent.



This Lent one of the themes that will weave through our worship is the Fruits of the Spirit. Each week a new poster or two will be hung at the front of the sanctuary to remind us of the different fruits.

‘But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.’

I think we’d all agree that it would be good to have more love, more joy, more peace, more patience, more kindness, more goodness, more faithfulness, more gentleness and more self-control. But these are not surface things that we just throw on like an accessory to the outfit we are currently wearing — they have to be put on from the inside out.

Sometimes a time of suffering, like going through a cancer journey or the loss of someone we love, will change people. They unexpectedly discover

that some of the hard edges have worn off, leaving more peace and gentleness inside or even more joy and gratitude. I've seen that happen. But why wait for a time of suffering to change us? It is also possible and so much better for us to actively work with God in changing our character.

If you really want to change, the first step is to recognize which of those fruits or those qualities in Colossians are missing in your life. Sometimes it's easier to look at the negatives to identify our problem areas, as in 'love is not irritable or resentful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way.' Or as our text from Colossians reads: "But now you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices."

If you don't even know where to start on yourself, I recommend you pray about what God would like to change in you. The wonderful thing about God is that God is patient and kind, and will encourage you with one thing at a time. Another, perhaps easier way to find out what you should work on is to ask your spouse, close friend or co-worker – they'll tell you what you need to work on!

For a moment I want you to reflect on which of these you need more of, and which one is lacking in your life. Some people are deficient in vitamin 'A' – which of these fruits are you deficient in?

Look for scripture passages about that character trait and consider memorizing one or two. Just google "scripture passages about patience". Pray about it every day.

There might be some things you need to let go of — things that produce the opposite of these qualities. For example, if you want more peace, watching the news all day isn't helping you. I mean that. That 24hr news cycle is probably worse for you right now than the threat of Covid-19 in Brockville. It's not good to feed on things that produce anxiety.

Last year a member of our congregation gave up watching the news for Lent and she said it was the best thing she'd ever done. Social media can have the same effect. Some are linking the increase of social media to the decrease of mental health in teens and young adults. Watch what you are filling yourself with.

Instead, pick up the new edition of the Word for You Today devotion book – it starts today. Instead, offer to volunteer at Loaves and Fishes or a Sunday Supper or commit to praying for the prayers that are on the prayer wall. New habits can become new clothes.

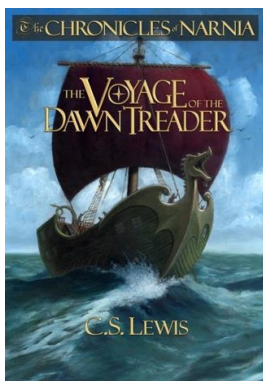


LOVE
JOY
PEACE
PATIENCE
KINDNESS
GOODNESS
FAITHFULNESS
GENTLENESS
SELF CONTROL

Of course, if you're really going to change, you need some resistance training. I don't learn peace and patience sitting on a beach with a Piña Colada. I learn patience from 7:30 -7:45am when I'm trying to get kids to grab their lunches, stick their breakfast dishes in the dishwasher, grab their books, brush their teeth, get their gear on and get in the car! Those places where routinely you find the negative coming out are wonderful practice grounds. Because we need to learn to dance a new dance, we need to find different ways of acting and reacting. Years of reacting impatiently in certain situations literally creates neuro-pathways so that it's the easy to take that path every time.

I remember hanging out at a friend's place in Alberta who lived on a big farm. From their house there was a narrow footpath to the barn. I remember standing there on a beautiful summer day and thinking how funny it was that there was this huge field, but every day, everyone walked the same path to and from the barn. This is human nature and it was probably the most direct route, and truth be told it would have taken work to deviate from the path. Walking in tall grass can sometimes be like walking in deep snow. But if you want to grow, if you want to improve, you have to step off that path. That's what it's like changing your character — it's hard at first but it does get easier. By the grace of God, you can put on new clothes and be made new.

Here's the thing. If we are serious in our walk with Jesus, we should be people who are changing and becoming more Christ-like. Churches can be filled with self-righteous, miserable, sourpusses, but they shouldn't be! When people come to church or meet a Christian, they should encounter a place or a person filled with the gifts of the Spirit. Those are the clothes we are called to wear.



Let me tell you one of my favourite stories of someone whose clothes were changed inside and out.

C.S. Lewis' book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, which is part of the *Narnia Chronicles*, has a wonderful character called Eustace. The book has one of the greatest opening lines: "There was once a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrub and he almost deserved it."

Eustace is the character that you love to hate — he's selfish, greedy, whiney, spoiled and complains constantly. He ends up in Narnia with his cousins Lucy and Edmund, who have been to Narnia before, and is taken aboard a ship with Prince Caspian, who is searching for seven lost knights. The ship stops at several islands.

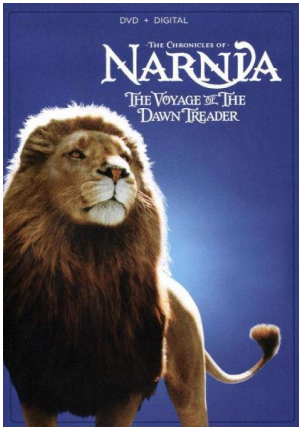
On one island, in order to avoid work, (because he's also incredibly lazy,) Eustace wanders away from the crew. He happens upon a cave, and

discovers that it is filled with treasure. Eustace begins loading his pockets with the treasure. You hear his thoughts as he does so, and he is trying to figure out how to get the treasure on board the ship without anyone else finding out about it, for he has no desire to share the wealth. He ends up falling asleep on the treasure only to wake up and discover that by some enchantment he has turned into a dragon.



He becomes miserable and lonely—it doesn't help that a golden wrist band he put on as a boy is now stuck and squeezing his large dragon arm quite painfully. He finally succeeds in communicating to his ship-mates that this terrifying dragon is actually him—Eustace.

He realizes he is stuck forever in this predicament. He is too heavy to perch on the boat and his wings won't carry him very far. It is hopeless. He soon understands that he is doomed to be left behind and live forever alone on the Island. After grieving for a time, he begins to accept his fate and strangely starts to change. He begins to help to get big trees to help repair the boat and he selflessly encourages them to go on without him. He has begun to change on his own, but for the change to become permanent he needs help.



It is here that Aslan enters the picture. Aslan represents Jesus in the books. Eustace realizes that Aslan wants him to follow him. They end up at a bubbling well with marble steps going down into it.

Here is Eustace describing the scene: "The water was as clear as anything and I thought if I could get in there and bathe it would ease the pain in my leg. But the lion told me I must undress first." He scratches off a layer of scales from his body and then another, but finds there was no way he could do it himself. He needed Aslan's help.

"The lion said - but I don't know if it spoke - 'You will have to let me undress you.' I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it. ...

Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off - just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt - and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been.

Then he caught hold of me - I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on - and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that, it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again. You'd think me simply phony if I told you how I felt about my own arms. I know they've no muscle and are pretty mouldy compared with Caspian's, but I was so glad to see them.

After a bit the lion took me out and dressed me - (with his paws?) - Well, I don't exactly remember that bit. But he did somehow or other: in new clothes - the same I've got on now, as a matter of fact—and then suddenly I was back here.”



We are called to put on some clothes, and not just any clothes, but the clothes of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. These aren't always the qualities the world wants or admires, but I tell you they are the qualities our world desperately needs. Jesus needs you and the Church to be fully who we have been called to be. It really is possible to change because that's how God created us. God wants us to be more and more the people we were created to be and more and more like Christ.

This Lent, dare to make a commitment that makes a difference: commit yourself to being a "little Christ" ... just for the next 6 weeks! Enjoy! May God bless you! Amen.