

**Sermon** December 31, 2023  
[Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3]

*Clothed in Christ*  
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you this morning, and peace, from God the Creator, and from God's Son, Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

As Susan mentioned, and as you heard, I switched the readings. I did that not to trick you or to make you stumble, but for a specific reason that you will know by the end of today's message.

Have you ever wondered what the experience was that led Martin Luther to change history by initiating the Protestant Reformation?

Was it a thunderstorm? Some of you know the story: Luther was attending law school and found himself caught in a thunderstorm, and prayed to Saint Anne, the mother of Mary, that if he'd be spared, he would become a monk. He was spared. One scholar actually claims he was *hit* by lightning, which might make him say such a thing – but he was spared, and some people believe that was the experience that led to the Protestant Reformation.

Know, however, that that experience occurred almost 20 years before Martin Luther wrote his famous 95 Theses, which officially, you might say, began the Reformation in 1517.

Maybe it was lust? Maybe it was Luther's desires that led him to initiate the Protestant Reformation. This after all, is what medieval Catholic polemicists claimed: that Luther began the Protestant Reformation so that he could be married, so that he could be with a woman.

Now the trouble with this claim is that, as I just mentioned, the Reformation began around 1517, when Luther posted his 95 Theses. He didn't get *married* until 1525 – and even then, he says, it was not of his own choosing. Katie Von Bora, whose birthday we'll be celebrating later in the month of January, was the one who initiated the relationship. If there was "Match" or "Plenty of Fish" or some other dating website back in the 16th century, *she's* the one who clicked "like" first, and Luther would later say that initially he wasn't in love with her, but he grew to love her over time.

So it seems unlikely that Luther started the Reformation because of lust, or because of his experience in a thunderstorm. So, what was it? Was it something else? In a moment, I'm going to answer this question by returning to Luther's testimony, but first: Context.

What was life like in the 16th century? Well, as most of you might guess, to use the words of the British philosopher Thomas Hobbes, it was nasty, brutish, and short. Luther himself lived to the ripe old age of 62. That was considered old for the time. It shows us something about the time in which he lived.

James Kittelson, a Luther scholar, writes the following: "Luther lived in an Age of Death. Painters, sculptors, and woodcarvers seized on this theme and the "Dance of Death" became one of the most common themes in late medieval art. Like the Pied Piper, the skeletal Grim Reaper with scythe in hand, led representatives of every social group and class twirling off to their own inevitable end."

Because it was an age of death, because death was so pervasive, so widespread, Kittelson claims that it was also an age of fire and brimstone. People interpreted the widespread fact of disease, pestilence and death as God's wrath, or God's punishment in response to human sin. And so, they sought ways to regain God's favor and avoid said punishment.

Can you name one of them? Well, of course we have pilgrimages. Several of you, I think, have been on one of the most famous, in Spain; pilgrimages to regain God's favor.

What else? Indulgences, of course, indulgences! Now, these are, you might say promissory notes, that if you pay a certain amount of money, at least as the teaching was in Luther's time, you will receive either the opportunity to do less penance for sin in this life, or you will relieve the suffering of your relatives in Purgatory. So, what a nice Christmas gift that would be!

So, we have we have several now; we have pilgrimages. We have indulgences. And we also have prayers and confession. So, say a certain prayer and you will regain, as it were, God's favor. My grandfather, who was Roman Catholic, had an Indulgence in his Bible, and I share that with you because by the time you get to the 20th century, of course, the indulgence controversy, which the Catholic Church in the middle of the 16th century approved, basically, of Luther's criticism that these shouldn't be sold by what are called "indulgence hawkers." The indulgence controversy had been settled in that regard, and by the 20th century, of course, it was no longer for payment to relieve oneself or one's loved ones from suffering. Indeed, the spiritual advice from the Catholic Church at Martin Luther's time, given all of these practices, or these efforts to obtain spiritual security, was "to do what is in your power."

How do I find mercy? How do I find salvation? How do I make myself right with God? The Catholic church, again of the medieval period, says, "do what is in your power." (I stress "medieval period" because by the late 20th century, Lutherans and Catholics came to a rough consensus regarding the fundamental doctrine of our faith, namely justification by grace.)

"Do what is within your power" they said, "God, as it were, will meet you halfway."

Yet for Martin Luther, who lived, as I mentioned, as a monk for 20 years, there was a problem. Luther, you may recall, was trained as a monk in the methods of introspection, which is another way of saying: he looked not only at the performance of sin, but also the sinful intentions that might lead to such performances. So he knew that within us, everything we desire and claim has some degree of self-interest bound

to it. And for that reason, Luther felt, *even our desire to be saved*, is born of sin. We want to save our own skins, or we want to save those close to us. So he knew that every move in the realm of ethics was tainted by self-interest. And so he asked questions like: How could a person know she or he had ever done enough to satisfy or placate a perfect God? How could a perfect God *ever* be placated by sinful human beings?

Here Luther felt trapped. God, it seemed, required of human beings to live to a standard they could not live! It was because of this problem that Luther said he “hated God.” God is the one who bound us. And yet at the same time, God is the one, it would seem, who punished us. Nevertheless, Luther kept searching the Bible for an answer to a way out of this prison.

And then, one night, he found it.

“At last,” he writes, “I gave heed to the context of the words; as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ There I began to understand the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. Here, I felt that I was altogether born again, and had entered Paradise itself through open gates.”

What? What exactly did Luther discover here? He discovers, in his reading of the Apostle Paul, that God’s righteousness, which is to say God’s moral perfection, is ultimately *not* that by which we are judged. Instead, he found, God *gives* us God’s righteousness as a gift, which we receive through faith. That’s it. This is Luther’s “Tower Discovery.” He realized that good works don’t precede salvation; rather, salvation, he claimed, the love by God, leads, hopefully, to good works.

God declares us righteous because of Christ. Now Luther discovers this, because, you may recall, he was a Biblical scholar, so he read and translated the Biblical languages, first Greek, and then Hebrew, into German. What he found in the Apostle Paul, is that when Paul speaks in multiple cases of “the righteousness of God,” the word “of” can also be translated as “from” – so it’s “the righteousness *from* God.”

That single preposition – I love this – changed Western history.

You and I wouldn’t be here if Luther wasn’t a grammarian! You and I wouldn’t be here if Luther hadn’t recognized, in the original Greek, that “the righteousness of God” could also be translated “the righteousness *from* God” – a gift from God.

To put in another, and I think, much more understandable way,

“God clothes us with Christ and sees us through Him” – full stop. “God clothes us through Christ and sees us through Him.” From Galatians 3: “For in Christ Jesus you are children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ, have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Once more: God clothes us with Christ and sees us through Him.

Now, there are many other passages like that in the New Testament. There’s one in Colossians 3, there’s one in Romans 11; but one will suffice: Galatians 3.

God clothes us with righteousness and sees us thereafter through Christ.

Now, let's pause here for a second. This is darn good news! This is darn good news!  
This is incredible news!

To say, "God clothes us in Christ and sees us through Him" is to say – and these are the words I want you to remember from today's sermon – *we are loved*.

We are loved, in spite of our faults, unconditionally. We are loved in spite of our faults. (And believe me, I know I have many of them; perhaps you have a few as well.) We are loved, in spite of our faults, unconditionally.

Now we might experience in various ways what it means to be loved. In church, for example, a phrase from a hymn might jump out and speak to us.

Or perhaps we experience God's love upon receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion, where you need do nothing except put out your hands.

Or maybe, and this would be quite a miracle, imagine this, you might experience what it means to be loved through the preaching of the Word of grace, which is my call.

But the way *I* know it, in addition to each of these, is through one person, and that person is my mom, who, as many of you know, died last January. Because of my mom, I know what it's like to be loved. I know what it's like to be loved. I'll never forget moments, before, shortly before her death, say six months, a year, where she would do things like, if I was working on perfecting a sermon for Queen Anne Lutheran Church, she'd come and put her hands on my shoulders and just say, "I'm so proud of you. I'm so proud of you."

Shortly before she died, I told her, I said, "Mom, I haven't achieved all the things I want to achieve. There's so much more; I feel like a failure." And she said, "I don't love you because of what you've done. I love you because of who you are." My favorite line in this regard from my mom is this: She said, "I was proud of you when you were a professor. But I'm prouder of you now that you're a pastor." And I said "why?" And she said, "Because you're nicer."

This is one way I know that I am loved; through the words and care of a loving parent. Of course, not everyone has the experience of being loved this way by a parent, and I understand that; we live in a fallen world. Parents can be abusive, vindictive, or indifferent. So not everyone has this experience; I feel quite fortunate, and for those of you who have a similar experience, I hope you feel that way, too.

But because not everyone *has* this experience, the Bible becomes of great importance. The Bible reminds us constantly that we are loved; that we are loved by God. Consider, for example Galatians 4, our second reading. You'll note that "we were adopted by God." And then, as Paul says at the end of that reading, "no longer a slave but a child, and if a child, then also an heir through God." I wrote in the margin here "Incredible!" We are not, by nature, God's children. We have strayed away. But God claims us anyway! God embraces us, here, through the metaphor of adoption.

But Isaiah 61, I think, really nails it this morning. Listen to what this author says, some 500 years before the writing of the New Testament:

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord.  
My whole being shall exalt in my God,  
for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation.  
He has covered me with the robe of righteousness.”

Do you hear the language? “He has clothed me. He has covered me with garments of salvation and righteousness.”

Sound familiar? This is why I always resist when people say, “The God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath, and the God of the New Testament is a God of love.” They’ve obviously never read Isaiah 61. This is why this text is called “the Fifth Gospel.” It’s chock-full of good news. And there’s more of it; verse 11:

“For as the Earth brings forth its shoots  
and as the garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord will *cause* righteousness and praise  
to spring before all the nations.”

That’s the purpose of Israel being chosen. It’s not ultimately simply for the sake of Israel that God does this; God does this *through* Israel, as a witness to “all the nations.”

Wow. Right there in the Old Testament, we have what I consider to be the Gospel of our Lord. *Gospel*, as you know, means good news. When we talk about our denomination as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the word *evangelion* in Greek means good news. We’re the “good news Christians,” or, as I like to tell people with whom I meet who are visitors, we’re the nicest Christians.

And I think the reason we’re nice, is that we know we’re loved.

This is what it means to live a life together in faith. Our care and concern for one another is so important, especially if we don’t have the parental support I shared with you a few minutes ago.

We all need someone in our life who will accept us without judgment. Maybe it’s a friend. Maybe it’s a coach. Maybe it’s a neighbor. Maybe it’s a sponsor in AA. Maybe it’s a fellow churchgoer. Maybe it’s a spouse, maybe it’s a therapist; maybe, even, it’s a pastor. These are all people who can be conduits of grace; all people who can mediate God’s unconditional love, even without using the language, by accepting us, so that we in turn can accept ourselves.

Think again about the story I shared with you about my mom. She didn’t love me because of the things I’ve done. She loved me for the person I have become. And the person I have become is in part because of her and my father, but it’s also because of Christ, and my involvement in this community, the body of Christ.

So we all need someone like that in our lives, but we there's something else we need to do as well. We need to *be* that kind of person that I've just described to others. We need to be "little Christs," or as Luther said, "Christs to one another."

So how do we do that? Well, here's my suggestion. Seek someone who is isolated; someone who is going through a rough spell – and just listen. Don't give advice. Don't tell them what to do. But *see* them, as God sees them, in and through Jesus Christ.

One person.

Today I've posed two questions. The first: Why did I choose the prophet Isaiah for our Gospel reading? The answer: It reminds us that the gospel can be found in the Old Testament, too. We are clothed – which is another way of saying God loves us, the way an ideal parent loves us.

Second, what led Luther to initiate the Protestant Reformation, one of the single greatest changes in the course of Western history? It was his experience of being loved by God unconditionally, which he discovered by way of a closer reading of Paul. This was the experience that set him free, thanks to the knowledge that righteousness is not something we earn, it's something we're given, when God sees us through Christ.

This is, in short, God's way of saying we are loved.

And this is my message this morning to you:

*You* are loved.

In Jesus name, Amen.