

Primal Instinct: The Sackcloth of Job (#2 in the *Paradise to Paradise* series)

*I have sewed sackcloth upon my skin, and have laid my strength in the dust.
My face is red with weeping, and deep darkness is upon my eyelids . . .*
(Job 16:15-16)

*You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.*
(Psalm 30:11)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, **January 21, 2018**
(Volume 1 Number 27)
Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

Last Sunday I launched my Epiphany sermon series, *Paradise to Paradise: Our Human Quest for the Perfect Fit*. Our series will take us from Genesis to Revelation, from the green fig leaves of Eden's Paradise to the white garments of the Paradise of Heaven.

Central to the biblical narratives of both paradises is clothing. We began with *Fig Leaves*, humankind's first attempt to clothe their newly-perceived nakedness, remembering that with these crudely improvised coverings our ancestors began their *Quest for the Perfect Fit*, soon enough weaving fabrics not merely for a simple covering, but for style and elegance.

This *Paradise to Paradise* trajectory we have embarked upon is a path paved with apparel, and while we began by spending some fun time in the mall, we should not forget that the question is deeply philosophical and spiritual, a universal quest and question of humankind, "*How shall we then stand before God? What shall we wear?*"

Between these two Paradises we will find that we have a large selection of clothing from which to choose. Today, then, let us begin our browsing, taking biblical garments from the rack to try on for size. I suppose these five sermons may be regarded as "Dressing Room" sermons, seeking as we try them on to discover metaphors to help us understand our human Journey.

Choosing from such a vast array of biblical fashions will be no easy task. Before leaving Genesis, for example, we could have been enchanted by the hues in Joseph's coat of many colors, a garment inspiring the colorful imagination of authors and artists ancient and modern. In Exodus we might have examined the rugged coarseness of the sandals Moses reverently slipped from his feet at the burning bush, standing on Holy Ground. In Kings we could hold and feel the softness of Elijah's mantle he wrapped around his tremulous face, entering into a Divine Presence he experienced as a "*still small voice.*" I guess I'm saying that just as we know walking into a mall that we won't be walking out with everything, neither will we be able to stop in every section of the bible's clothing. Five trips to the dressing room await, so let's get started.

Imagine a mom taking her young children on an attic adventure at the house where she grew up, happening upon an old wooden chest tucked away in a corner, guarded by her old Teddy Bear. Dusting it off, it is as if she is wiping away the patina of the years from an archaeological find. Opening the chest she finds folded articles of old clothing, treasures from the past as each article seems to tell a story, another patch in the ever-growing quilt of mom's story.



Mom is swept back into her childhood by the textures, shapes, and colors as they call forth the remembrance of people, places, and events woven into the Journey of her Becoming. The chest of clothing chronicles a cadre of stories for her children to hear, gifted now with a deeper knowing of who they are and what they might yet Become.

With varying degrees of reverence mom inspects the clothing. One piece prompts a smile at the memory of its wearing, perhaps a Girl Scout uniform reminding her of sweet times selling cookies with friends, learning goal-setting, learning industry, learning organization, learning responsibility. There also is the costume she wore in the 5th grade school play, sparking memories of friends and of laughter as she learned how to tap into imagination and creativity.

Now, imagine with me an article of clothing triggering an unpleasant memory, her children noticing the abrupt shift, an unexpected silence as the laughter of only a moment ago vanishes. Is that a tear they see mom attempting to wipe away before they notice? What is this dress and of what has she been reminded? The betrayal of a friend? A moment of shame re-emerging from a poor decision, long-since regretted? Perhaps the dress reminds her of a painful loss, wearing it on the day of an accident? Or, perhaps her recoil is because its texture and scent sparks a vivid remembrance of a moment of vulnerability and helplessness, a moment when a *Primal Instinct* surged within her, leaving her feeling trapped, alone, and afraid.

The garment we consider today, the *Sackcloth of Job*, will take us back to that *Primal Instinct* where we will discover a profound gesture of human sorrow. Our first parents surely felt this *Primal Instinct* as they were expelled from Eden's paradise. Paradise Lost became Paradise Lust, a craving for a re-discovery of Paradise. Expelled from Eden, Adam and Eve fully engaged the world in its post-paradise dualism -- life and death, joy and sorrow, light and dark, mourning and dancing. Outside Eden, *Sackcloth* became an indispensable part of the human wardrobe. "In the day you eat thereof, you will surely die," the Creator had said, and so suffering and sorrow have always been a part of our story, human nature never shaking nor relinquishing this fundamental, inescapable sadness and melancholy. *Sackcloth* will hang, always, in our closets. Hopefully we will but rarely pull it out to drape it over our flesh, but it must, we know, always remain. Each one of us, at one time or another, will be draped with robes fitting us to join the *Sackcloth* clad choir.

Today's visit to the biblical dressing room will not be pleasant, but will take us back to our primal essence. *Sackcloth* is not a garment we wish to wear, but it will help us assess our human condition. No need of mirrors in this dressing room. Who cares how it fits or how it looks? In our *Sackcloth* moments any concern for fashion sense is nonsense.

If Job was the most famous model of Sackcloth, it had been modeled earlier (its first mention in the bible) by the patriarch Jacob. When Joseph's brothers show their father the bloody coat of many colors, falsified evidence that his beloved son had met an untimely death, we read, "*Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son.*"

Sackcloth is intentionally uncomfortable in order to remind the wearer of his/her emotional and spiritual anguish. In some traditions discomfort is augmented by intentional pain, all done in the name of a search for a proper companion for sorrow.

Sackcloth was made of coarse goat's hair and either wrapped or draped across the body. This tradition of self-mortification isn't confined to Jewish history, of course, though our English word "*sack*" is itself of Semitic origin, with both Hebrew and Greek ancestry. Throughout Christian history there have been those who continue the tradition, wearing the *cilice* (*hairshirt*), a word from the region of Cilicia in Asia Minor where shirts were made of Cilician goat's hair.

Some will no doubt recall the albino monk Silas, in Dan Brown's "*The DaVinci Code*," who wore the *cilice* undershirt so that his intentional discomfort would remind him of the work he had yet to do. While Silas (from *cilice*, get it?) is fictional, from Thomas Beckett to St. Patrick to Charlemagne (who was buried in his *cilice*) to Mother Teresa, many have tried *Sackcloth* on for size and found it appropriate to their spiritual needs, quickening them to alertness in their own spiritual battle.

Now, to be sure, we may not actually don *Sackcloth* today. While we Mainline Protestant Christians don't have this tradition, we still wear Sackcloth often enough in soul and spirit. Sackcloth hangs in our closets, for as human persons we can, in an instant, be reduced to the primal moment – afraid, vulnerable, and crying out for help.

On January 13 a false ballistic missile alert was issued via the Emergency Alert System to hundreds of thousands of cellphones in Hawaii. The alert stated that there was an incoming ballistic missile threat incoming to Hawaii and advised residents to seek shelter immediately, stating emphatically, "*This is not a drill.*" Full blown panic ensued for 38 minutes. It was 38 minutes of virtual sackcloth as the desperation mounted, people trying to reach their loved ones. For 38 minutes an entire state was plunged into the Primal Instinct.

The best known biblical model for Sackcloth is Job, who taught us that the *Sackcloth* moment is not only for the unrighteous, but that all human persons will try on that garment in the Dressing Room of life.

“*Job’s Despair*” is a famous work of William Blake, the 1805 original now in the Morgan Library in New York. Job’s distress is caused by sudden, unexpected loss – loss of children, loss of wealth, and loss of health. Seemingly, Job has lost the presence and protection of God, reduced to the Primal Moment, and sackcloth is laid over his loins.



The scene, as we know all too well, is not extraordinary to Job. In fact, any one of us at any time can receive the dreaded phone call that triggers the *Primal Instinct*.

The human spirit of invention has always sought to make *primal moments* as uncommon as possible. Much of our human genius in technological developments is spent warding off such *Primal Moments*, making them as infrequent as we possibly can. The *Primal Moment* strips our lives down to the bare fundamentals, to the simplest truths of what it is to be human. Tennessee Williams summed up the human condition, “*While we can work to alleviate suffering, it cannot be erased. The body will decay, loved ones will depart, the known will dissolve into the unknown. We can give food to the starving, medicine to the sick, and solace to the lonely, but the world is wide, its agonies endless.*”

The world is wide. Its agonies endless. Indeed. *Sackcloth* is always with us. We can run, but we can’t hide. Linus says to Charlie Brown, “*Here’s my philosophy, Charlie Brown. There is no problem so big, no problem so complicated, that it can’t be run away from.*” But, Alas, Linus, you are wrong. Sometimes we seem so completely trapped that running away is not an option. So we seek help. We seek God.

I like to think that Jesus suffered the absence of God when he died on the cross so that we might always have a promise of the Presence of God. Jesus’ darkest *Sackcloth* moment was when he felt his Father had forsaken him. His cry from cross, trapped and alone and helpless, is a quotation of Psalm 22, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”

I love it that Jesus quoted the psalms on the cross. People in trouble, people afraid, people depressed – live in the psalms. If you’re going through a difficult time now, I suggest living for a time in the psalms. Athanasius was right when he said, “*Most scripture speaks to us. The psalms speak FOR us.*” The psalms speak FOR US in the most primal of our moments . . . today, just as they did for Jesus.

At last, remember with gladness the promise of the Psalm with which we began: *You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.*