

Safeguarding Tradition: The Tzitzit of Numbers (#3 in the *Paradise to Paradise* series)

*The LORD said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites,
and tell them to make fringes (Hebrew = tzitzit)
on the corners of their garments throughout their generations
and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner.
You have the fringe so that, when you see it,
you will remember . . . I am the LORD your God.
(Numbers 15:37 – 39a, 41b)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, **January 28, 2018**
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We are now midway through an Epiphany series I've titled *Paradise to Paradise: Our Human Quest for the Perfect Fit*, a journey taking us from Genesis to Revelation, from Eden's Paradise to Heaven's Paradise. Clothing is a key feature in the narratives of both Paradises. With the Fig Leaves of Genesis -- humankind's first attempt to clothe their newly-perceived nakedness -- our ancestors began their *Quest for the Perfect Fit*, a quest which ends with the pure white wedding garments of the church at what Revelation calls the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. Our *Paradise to Paradise* trajectory is a path paved with apparel, suggestive of a deeply philosophical and spiritual quest, "*When we stand before God, What shall we wear?*"

To be sure, between these two Paradises is a large selection of clothing from which to choose. Each of these five messages may be regarded as *Dressing Room* sermons, each week trying on for size a different item of biblical clothing. I suppose you could say I'm setting up a mannequin to display the clothing customs of the bible, seeking through the various textures, shapes, colors, and functions to discover metaphors for our human journey.

Just as I wouldn't enter a haberdashery expecting to emerge with everything on the racks, neither can we try on all the clothing we might pull from the biblical racks. I might have loved to try on Joseph's coat of many colors, or slip on Moses' sandals from the burning bush, or felt Elijah's mantle which he wrapped around his face when he heard the *still small voice* of God. Or perhaps to have tried on the garment of camel's hair which John the Baptist wore in the Judean wilderness, a fine complement to his delectable diet of locusts and wild honey (though we did come close to that last Sunday as we tried on the rough Sackcloth of Job).

Midway through our journey (3 of 5) we find ourselves far from Eden's Paradise but far, also, from Heaven's Paradise. Is our *Quest for the Perfect Fit* taking us homeward or forward? Or, perhaps, both? Perhaps forward is homeward, as T. S. Eliot suggested:

*We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started,
And know the place for the first time.*

There is danger in this middle-of-the-journey experience, of forgetfulness. Today's *Dressing Room* visit will introduce an article clothing that will keep us, venturing far from Eden, from forgetting our origins. The Tzitzit will keep us from forgetting who we are, and whose we are, thus safeguarding tradition and linking us to our past. So we read from Numbers 15, "*You have the fringe so that when you see it, you will remember . . . I am Yahweh, your God!*"

From our childhood, clothing plays a key role in shaping our understanding of who we are. Who doesn't feel good when dressed sharply? With clothing we can transform ourselves into a walking billboard, whether advertising a certain brand we like or shouting out our allegiance to our country, our college, our club. Since Adam and Eve first stitched together their earth-tone wardrobe, using clothing to send messages was an inevitable evolution of the textile industry. But much more important than telling others who we are, is reminding ourselves who we are.

Gunilla Norris wrote an essay titled *Before All This*, telling of a dress handed down, in accordance with Swedish custom, to her through several generations. She tells of the dates stitched in the sash -- Anno 1901, the date her grandmother entered finishing school, and Varend, Anno 1935, the place and date of her mother's wedding. She writes: "*I can feel my mother and my grandmother in it. There is much history in this dress, it tells me I am part of specific places, people, and events. I am very careful of it as I want to pass it on one day . . . In my national costume I feel defined and rooted. I feel an obligation to tradition.*"

Perhaps you have an item in your closet like this, one full of family history with a story to tell connecting you to your heritage? I know I do, and I wear it every Sunday, the stole which forms a connection with those ordained in United Methodist ministry – past, present, and future. Clothing's power to nail down the roots of who we are range from the intensely private to a more open expression that is communal and cultural.

An example of how clothing can be used as a private link to our roots is the story of the French mathematician and scientist, Blaise Pascal, who was almost killed at the age of 31 during an intense lightning storm while crossing a bridge in Paris, his life spared as he was thrown from his carriage before it plunged into the water, killing his horses. This began a two hour period in which he so directly experienced the presence of God that he forged a link to that moment which he actually sewed into his clothing.

A few days after Pascal's death eight years later a servant noticed a curious bulge in Pascal's jacket. Opening the lining he withdrew a folded parchment, written in Pascal's hand, the record of his mystical illumination, his two hours in the presence of God. For eight years he had worn them as an amulet, hiding them in his coat, sewing and unsewing as necessary. At the top Pascal had drawn a cross, and underneath the cross were these words (I'll abbreviate):

*In the year of the Lord 1654, Monday, November 23
From about half-past ten in the evening until half-past twelve.
Fire! God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob . . .
Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy, Peace . . . Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy . . .
I will not forget Thy word. Amen.*

Pascal's two hour religious experience gripped his soul and changed the course of his life, as we know from his writings. Though he never shared with anyone the full experience, from that point he made his scientific career second to his theological pursuit, writing his most famous work, *Pensees* (French: *Thoughts*). Though private, he stored his record of that intense experience close to his heart because he wanted to feel the texture of the parchment as a way to remind him that this experience was NOT imaginary but real, possessing form and texture. The shape and weight he gave to this experience would be a constant reminder. God's presence stamps us with its moments, and Pascal choose to stamp his clothing as a reminder of that moment. Pascal was safeguarding the moment from being lost, retaining the memory in a way that allowed him to plug in, over and over, to its original power.

We often emblazon our clothes with messages: From "Go Hogs!" to "*Stop Global Warming!*" to "*Save the Humpback Whale!*" What Pascal did was fundamentally different. Within his jacket was his intimate possession of something hidden from view, the inner core of his faith.

What Pascal did privately the Hebrews were commanded to do as a culture, to safeguard traditions of the faith with articles of clothing. These articles of ritual dress, especially the one we consider today -- the fringes (*tzitzit*) -- offer a way to plug in to the spiritual energy of the nation's traditions.

Before we come to the *tzitzit*, let me mention how Deuteronomy 6 commands the wearing of ritual dress known as phylacteries (a Greek word meaning "*safeguard*"). "*Hear, O Israel, the LORD your God is one Lord. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away . . . Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead.*"

*This image is a 1923 Marc Chagall painting called **The Praying Jew**, now in the Joseph Winterbotham Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago. Note the leather straps running along his left arm, holding in place a black box on his finger. The black box on his forehead is likewise held in place by leather straps. These boxes, called phylacteries, contain the commands of God found in Deuteronomy 6*

The purpose of the *phylactery* was to safeguard Israel's redemptive story in a public way, for the community's instruction and inspiration. Still, while public, Jesus' pointed out that the chief concern was private, the keeping of these words near the heart. Jesus denounced the Pharisees' hypocrisy when they forgot this. "*Woe to you, Pharisees, scribes, hypocrites, for you make your phylacteries broad and your fringes long so that you might be seen of men*" (Matthew 23:5).



Jesus is here condemning an external display of faith lacking sincerity of heart, putting on and taking off of God's words based on whom one wishes to impress. His words reminded them that the goal of our most precious rituals must never be to impress, but rather to be repositories of the sacred with energy directed inward, privately, to the place where infinity touches the soul.

To be sure, we don't strap on *phylacteries* in our United Methodist tradition, but we do cherish the rituals which link us to our past and plug us in to the power of our story, ensuring the story's transmission across generations. to prompt us and our children to reach for the highest in ourselves, and then something higher than ourselves.

It's easy in a time of rapid change to toss traditions overboard, dispensing with them as hindrances. Yet, when we stop burdening our youth with any claims from text and tradition, assuming they inherently know how to put life together for themselves, thus removing them from the traditions tying them to previous generations, do we not rob them? All that's left for them is context and culture, so that our neglect lays them bare and without defense before the popular images of life that have been well-marketed.

Now, back to the *tzitzit*. The *Tallit* (a rectangular prayer shawl) has four fringes called the *tzi-tzit*. One might say that the very purpose of the *Tallit* is to hold the *Tzitzit*, the tassels which become the "wings" of the garment. There was never any command to wear a *Tallit*, but there was a command to wear the *tzitzit* at the four corners one's clothing.



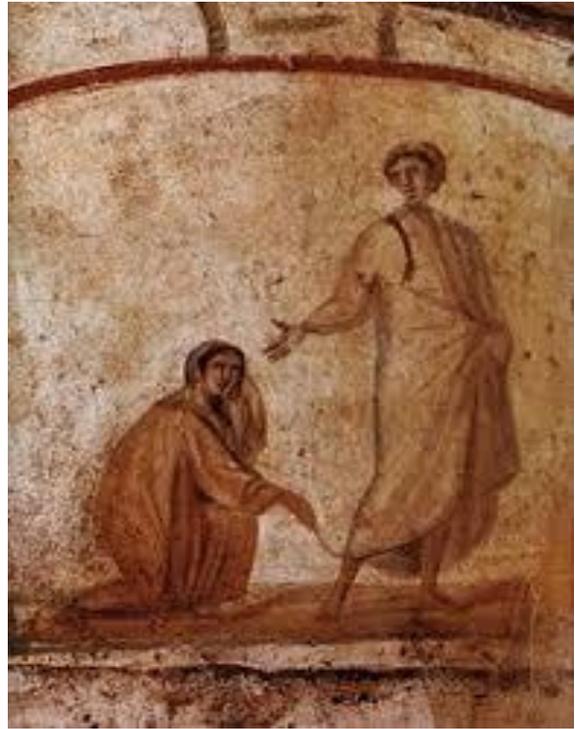
Jesus would have worn the *tzitzit*.

"After the people of that place recognized (Jesus), they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed." (Matthew 14:35-36)

Mark tells an amazing story of healing: *"She . . . came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, or she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?"*"(Mark 5:30).

When she touched the *tzitzit*, something moved, something stirred, energy flowed, coursing through her body to awaken a healing process long dormant. It seems a current of energy transferred along the *tzitzits* that Jesus, sensing this energy, turned and asked his disciples, *"Who touched my cloak?"*

This image is from the Catacomb of Saints. Peter and Marcellinus, in Rome, both martyred in 304 A. D. The catacomb is a mass grave where many thousands are buried, so I find it wonderful that here, in this place of stillness, in this exhausting slog of mortality, is seen the promise of a future stirring. As the woman touches the fringe of Jesus' garment, the tzitzit, something shines. The prophet Malachi wrote (4:2) that "*the Son of Righteousness will arise with healing in his wings!*" That's exactly what you see in this 4th century image . . .



I see in the *Tallit* a visible symbol of the stirring of creation in Genesis 1 when the Spirit of God rippled over the chaos of a world without form and voice, the agent of creative energy. Something moved. Something stirred. In Genesis 1 we read of the divine vibration setting all things into motion. This is why when you see Jewish men praying with the shawl you will see them rocking and bobbing in constant movement.

No wonder the *Tallit* and its *tzitzit* are not treated casually, but is a garment one uses for many years or even a lifetime, never discarded. A threadbare *Tallit* is treated with great respect, as if a mantle of holiness acquired from years of use, prayers absorbed into every stitch, each of the traditional 39 windings of the *tzit-tzit*.

I conclude with a portion of Lawrence Russ's amazing poem, "*Prayers at the Broken Gate*":

*In the outer hall, old men, with stiffened fingers,
strap onto their arms and foreheads
leather boxes filled with the sacred words.
They adjust their gear with care, like elderly
spacemen, absorbed, preparing themselves
for groundless voyaging . . .*

*And soon it begins in earnest, the soul-drunken swaying,
the grumbling and moaning of a foreign tongue
drenched with muddy currents of time.
Eyes closed, their bodies tossing forward and back . . .*

*While the fringes of worshipper's prayer shawls shake
as the spirit does, unravelling
at the edge of endless space.*