

Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11

I'm going to attempt to preach our text this morning by using three children's tales... fairy tales, I guess we could say. Not because God's Word in Isaiah is make-believe, but because it may serve to better keep this text within our memory, and bring out the Gospel in a clear way.

The first tale is a Danish story. It's called "The Emperor's New Clothes." It seems that the emperor is tricked into parading naked through the streets of the city. He is convinced that he is wearing a beautiful new set of clothes, but he actually has nothing on. His servants keep their mouths shut and say nothing to him, but one brave little boy shouts out, "The emperor is wearing nothing at all!"

This first story captures our conception and birth into the world. We come parading into this life wearing nothing at all—not physically, although that may be true. The important point for us to grasp is that we are born spiritually naked. There is no covering to cloak and hide our sin and guilt.

Our first parents attempted to cover their shame with fig leaves. But when God came looking for them, they hid, because they knew that fig leaves could not cover, from Him, their guilt and shame. And they were right. God saw their sin-stained hands. He saw the lies on their lips...the fruit in their bellies. He saw their wicked hearts. Even dressed with fig leaves, before God, Adam and Eve were completely naked.

Our spiritual nakedness before God becomes serious when, like the emperor, we convince ourselves that we are fully clothed. The emperor refused to believe that there was a problem. Although no one else did, he closed his eyes to his own nakedness. That is the way of our sinful hearts. We refuse to see our spiritual nakedness. We don't admit that a problem exists between us and God. After a day of selfish living, we lay our head upon our pillow without a thought to how we rejected God's will through the day. We are fully aware of the nakedness of others. We easily recognize their glaring offenses, but we close our eyes to our own wretchedness. And even when we hear the cry from God's preached Word, "You're wearing nothing at all! You're spiritually naked!" we turn a deaf ear to the warning, and like the emperor, we forge ahead and pretend that all is well.

Today, I stand before you like the little boy shouting out, "You have nothing on! You need a covering—a covering for your sin and guilt and shame!"

And that leads us to our second story, the story of Cinderella. This tale, dating back to 9th Century China, tells of a poor girl working as a housemaid for her stepmother. Worked every day to the point of exhaustion, Cinderella remained a poor girl dressed only with rags.

"Ah!" we may think, "Better to be Cinderella than the emperor. At least she had something to wear." But this is a deceptive lie of Satan. He doesn't mind at all if we cover ourselves, as long as it is with the filthy rags of our own making. For when we like the emperor, tire of hearing the little boy cry out, "You have nothing on!" Satan tricks us into putting on filthy rags—our own good deeds; our kindnesses toward others; our charity to those less fortunate.

But Isaiah writes, “Our good deeds are as filthy rags.” And so, from the emperor to Cinderella, we fall from the frying pan into the fire. “I’m spiritually naked? Okay then, I’ll wear these good deeds of mine.” When God’s Law accuses us of being disobedient before Him, we hold up our good behavior and say, “I’m not a wretched sinner, look at all the good I’ve done!” But these rags of ours only serve to blind us to the truth. Our own goodness will not pass us into eternal life. When the man was found in the wedding banquet of Matthew 22 to be wearing improper clothing, he was bound hand and foot, and cast into the outer darkness. And that is our fate unless we are properly clothed before God.

Now in the tale, Cinderella has a fairy godmother who gives her a beautiful dress to wear... but only until midnight. For then, she will be returned to her filthy rags. And that is the deception within our sinful minds. For when God dresses us in proper clothing; when God exchanges our filthy rags for the rich garments of Christ’s righteousness; when God, in Holy Baptism, covers our sin and guilt and shame with the covering of forgiveness in Christ Jesus, we doubt that it will last. When the midnight hour comes and Jesus returns in glory, we think that we will stand before the Righteous Judge dressed, not in the garments of salvation, but in our old filthy rags. Friend, do you know beyond any doubt that you will enter through the gates of paradise when Christ returns? The truth is that our weak hearts and doubting minds answer, “I hope so, but perhaps I’m not so sure.” Like Cinderella, we’re afraid of the midnight hour. We’re afraid that our garments of salvation will disappear and we will dress ourselves once more with our old rags.

And so we need to hear our third story—the story of “The Prince and The Pauper.” Written by Mark Twain in the 19th

Century, The prince and the pauper were two boys who looked alike. Yet, the one was a wealthy prince and the other was a poor pauper. But one day the two boys exchanged clothing, and with the clothing went the role. The prince put on the pauper’s clothing and lived as the pauper. The pauper put on the prince’s clothing and lived in the palace as the prince. And that is the story that Isaiah writes of in our text: “I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness.”

Because you, like the emperor, were born spiritually naked; because you, like Cinderella, cannot enter into life dressed in rags—God became Man. He became just like us in every way, except for our sin. And He freely and willingly exchanged His princely clothing for our filthy rags. He became poor that we might become rich. In your baptism Jesus covered your guilt and sin, not with rags, but with “garments of salvation,” and “a robe of righteousness.” And to make sure you know that these are yours to keep forever, He took your filthy clothing and put it on Himself. And He was led to a cross where they stripped Him naked. And it was there that He, as a pauper, died your death so that you would have His life. He covered Himself with your sin that you would be covered in His holiness. He took your shame that you would be received into the eternal Kingdom. The Prince became a pauper to suffer our punishment that you would live forever as a prince—God’s child—children of the King of Kings.

When Isaiah says that we are dressed with “garments of salvation,” and “arrayed in a robe of righteousness,” he’s referring to Jesus. Because Jesus is our salvation. Jesus is our righteousness. “All of you,” says St. Paul, “who have been baptized into Christ, have

clothed yourselves with Christ.” You’re not just a pauper dressed in princely clothing—you, the baptized, are dressed in Christ Jesus. He Himself covers your shame. He Himself is the covering for your sin.

Are you still a pauper? Not to your God. When He looks at you, all He sees is a prince, for you are clothed with Christ. He does not see your sin. All He sees is a forgiven child of His. He does not see your guilt. All He sees is the holiness of Christ. Your nakedness, your filthy rags, are now gone forever because Jesus, in Holy Baptism, has dressed you with Himself. And that, friend, is no fairy tale. It is the good news of Jesus Christ for you. Amen.