

Isaiah 61:10

The Prince and the Pauper is a classic tale. Written by Mark Twain in the 19th Century, it tells the story of two boys in 16th Century England. They were identical to each other in their looks, but one of the boys lived in the king's palace and the other lived in a shack. As the tale goes, one day the boys decided to switch places. Keeping it a secret, the prince put on the pauper's ragged clothing and the pauper put on the royal garments of the prince. And for a while each boy lived in the other boy's shoes. The pauper lived as a prince and the prince lived as a pauper.

The story is intriguing and worth reading and it resembles the true story of our life in Christ. "The Word became flesh," writes St. John. St. Paul says, "Our Lord Jesus Christ... though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor that you through His poverty might become rich." Isaiah writes, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord...for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; He has clothed me with the robe of righteousness." What does all this mean? It means that the Prince became a pauper, and we paupers are now clothed as a prince.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace. As the Son of God His place is with the Father and the Spirit in the highest heavens. But one day many years ago he came to our poor world of sin and death and He dressed Himself with the clothing of a pauper. Jesus in the manger, although He was the Prince of Heaven, did not look like a prince; He looked like a pauper. Mary and Joseph were not wealthy. Jesus was born of a humble and lowly virgin. After His birth, she wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a wooden box which was nothing more than a feeding trough. Looking at Jesus even as He grew up, you could not tell that He was a prince. His flesh was like our flesh. He was hairy. He became hungry and thirsty. He grew tired. He shed tears. He was a pauper. God had become Man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the tale by Mark Twain, even dressed as a pauper the prince remained a prince. And so with Jesus. Though covered with human flesh, Jesus did not cease being God. He is true God and true Man. And in Twain's story because the prince was dressed as a pauper, he was treated like a pauper. So with our Lord. People treated Jesus with contempt. They were critical of Him. They gave Him no respect. They did not laud Him as their prince. In the end they rejected Him by casting Him out of the royal city and nailing Him to a cross. Although He was and is the Prince of God Jesus, dressed with the clothing of a poor pauper, was treated as the lowest pauper of all.

But it had to be that way. In the story by Mark Twain, the only way for the pauper to live as a prince was by the prince putting on his poor clothing and then giving his rich garments to him. And so for us. Unless God had become Man; unless He had dressed Himself with our pauper's clothing and been treated as a pauper, and even died as a pauper, you and I would never live as princes before God. Mark Twain's prince may have donned the pauper's clothing out of boyish curiosity, but God did it out of pure grace and mercy. "He became poor so that you through His poverty might become rich."

You and I may look like common, everyday people; but we are paupers really...for we are poor, wretched sinners before God. We are all born that way. And paupers do not become

anything else in life except paupers. A pauper cannot become a prince by trying real hard. Princes are born, not made. Sons of kings are princes, but children of paupers always remain paupers. Except that the tale by Mark Twain relates this strange occurrence that the pauper lived as a prince. He was treated as a prince. He ate like a prince. He slept like a prince. He was a prince and only because the prince became a pauper. And that story's strange occurrence is God's truth for you. Jesus became poor that you might become rich. He took your place and gave His place to you.

"He has clothed me," writes Isaiah, "With the garments of salvation...with the robe of righteousness." This happened in your baptism. You, a pauper...a poor sinner with no hope, were clothed by God with the garments of your Prince. You cannot see those garments, but they are there. You are, dear baptized child of God, wearing Christ. You are covered with His righteousness. You are clothed with His salvation. Jesus, your Prince, switched places with you in the waters of the font. He took your poor, miserable sins to Himself, and He gave you His royal garments to wear.

That doesn't seem fair, does it? As a child I wondered why Mark Twain's prince would agree to become a pauper and suffer as a pauper suffers. The pauper had nothing to lose. He got the good end of the deal. He was raised up, but the prince became the lowest in the kingdom. Jesus took your place as a pauper. He took your place on the cross. He took your place in hell because being fair is not what God is all about. He is about showing mercy to you no matter what the cost is to Him. And so Jesus becomes covered with blood on Golgotha, and in baptism He covers you with His holy innocence. Jesus becomes clothed with nothing but shame as they strip Him on the cross, and you He clothes with garments of salvation.

And so who are you really? Are you a prince, or a pauper? In Twain's story, when the pauper lived as a prince there were times when he nearly gave the secret away. How he acted and what he said were not always in the manner of a prince. And so with us. In Holy Baptism God dressed you as a prince; as His royal son or daughter. But day after day how we speak and how we act gives away the deep, dark secret inside our hearts and minds that we are nothing more than paupers; we are and remain poor, wretched sinners. We have no right to the King's palace. We have no claim to His inheritance. But, friend and fellow pauper, we are not just paupers; we are also what God has declared us to be—in Holy Baptism you were given birth into Christ. You were born of your King and His royal garments are yours forever.

In Twain's tale the story ends happily. The true prince back in his palace declares that the pauper with whom he had exchanged roles was forever a friend of the royal family. His place now was always with the prince; always within the palace. Dear fellow paupers, this is forever your place with Jesus. He does not see you as a poor pauper. He forgives your wretched sins. He declares you in your baptism to be forever with Him. Your place is not outside of His Kingdom. Your place is in the palace of the King of Kings. The garment of salvation you wear is what He clothes you with. He will always have a place for you at His side. Your place is here in His House where His Word bespeaks you righteous. Your place is at His Table where His royal Supper is given to you—the rich food of His own body and blood. And even though we come to His House and to His Table time after time with stains upon those garments; with the stains of our sinfulness soiling the pure, innocent robe which

He put on us in baptism, He never stops forgiving you; He never grows weary of washing your robes in His blood shed for you.

And so who are we? We are paupers who live forever as princes in Christ and with Christ because He, our Prince, became a pauper for us. This means that we want to take great care in how we speak to each other and how we act toward one another. If we look for the worthless pauper in each other, we will easily find it. We won't have to dig too deep into each other's lives to find the pauper's ragged clothing. It's there. Our sins and weaknesses; our worthlessness is pretty evident in how we live.

But can we not see each other as our God does? Can we not treat each other as our God does? He sees you as princes in Christ. He deals with you in mercy. He forgives you. He does not pass you off as a worthless pauper. He calls you His own child for Jesus' sake. Not one of us has a claim on Christ, but He claims each and every one of you, and not because you live like princes...for we do not...but because He is your Prince who loves to show mercy. Let's show that same kind of mercy to our brothers and sisters in Christ here at Christ Lutheran Congregation. Amen.