

Dressing up: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Colossians 3:12-17

December 26, 2006

Once a year, having waited to the very end of December, my wife and I dress up. Some people wait a lifetime to start living, but fortunately for us, New Year's Eve intervenes every year. With mortality staring us right in the face, we get around to that date we should have had months ago. Rexene looks absolutely stunning in a cocktail dress. (How many times does a pastor's wife get to wear a cocktail dress?)

Others on the dance floor share in the sense of occasion. Even the most casual folks are wearing their best pair of jeans. If dress is a signifier, as the academics say, what it signifies on New Year's Eve is that people of every class want to look classy.

Why should the surfaces matter? Why should my wife, who has seen me bleary and unshaven, care how I look tonight? But she does light up, and I am grateful—for these borrowed hours and to see her smile.

Once every year, Hannah visited her son Samuel at the Tabernacle and brought him a linen ephod. It was a gesture of great poignancy and tenderness. Years before, with childlessness staring her right in the face, she had promised God that she would give her first son back to God. She had kept that bargain. "For this child I have prayed," she said, and took him to the priests, offering him as a living sacrifice with just as much resolve as Abraham offering Isaac.

The ephod was the garment of priesthood. It signified purity, and the vows that set Samuel apart. Or rather, it represented the purity of the One he represented. In a sense, that was absurd, for the robe was mere homespun linen; there was nothing supernatural about it. And yet it engendered respect for the boy, within the boy. By fitting it on him, Hannah wrapped her gift for God.

The garment was also significant for what the boy would never wear: armor, finery, filth. If the priest lived vicariously for his people, even faithful people like Hannah, the ephod signified certain renunciations and sacrifices that he would make. We can only imagine the tenderness with which Hannah clothed Samuel and with which he received this gift from his mother. In her very person, she demonstrated the high price of being true to God.

A thousand years later, when the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Colossae, he may have had this young priest-in-training in mind. All followers of Christ were priests, or students of the high priest Jesus. Interestingly enough, Colossae was known for producing a particularly fine wool called *colossinus*. Hebraic law forbade the mixing of wool with linen, but still the local industry provided Paul with a convenient metaphor.

“As God’s chosen ones,” he wrote, “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. . . . Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

Paul wanted these young believers to put aside discord and start thinking about the way they looked to outsiders. They had not exactly been behaving beautifully; their church had a reputation for trouble. “You were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,” he said. “Now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self.”

These young Christians had been called to represent Christ for a disbelieving world. No wonder they kept Paul’s letter: they could hardly believe what it said. Even though he had plenty to say about Christ, their Lord, he had even more to say about them and their calling.

They should set aside their ideas about roles of slave and master. (Philemon and Onesimus were from Colossae.) They should sacrifice prejudices that separated Jews and Greeks, circumcised from uncircumcised. No one should exhibit naked anger, naked ambition or anything else that had formerly defined them. If they could not change their natures entirely, then at least they should clothe themselves in Christ.

The priesthood of all believers means not only that we are empowered, but also that we all represent the divine. We need to look the part. It’s an enormous responsibility.

It still amazes me, each time I put on a clergy robe, that God has allowed a not-so-young man who feels like a student to take on sacerdotal functions as if I really knew what I was doing. My old and new selves are not that different. When Paul speaks in Romans and Galatians about “putting on Christ,” he must be speaking to me.

This role seems all the stranger when I run into an old college friend who finds it amusing. When we were in college this role was the last thing anyone would have predicted for me. “People must think you’re so holy,” my old friend kids, “standing up there in front of the church.” Well, not really. The people know from hard experience to put their trust in the One the pastor represents. The chief test is what my daughter thinks—whether the public and the private man are the same. Good-naturedly, my friend persists, “Come on, we used to have some pretty rowdy late nights. Just who do you think you’re putting on?” Well, I know who I’m putting on. And because Christ is spacious and gracious, the fit can look a little baggy.

Rexene and I don’t stay out terribly late on New Year’s Eve, but we enjoy ourselves nonetheless. After a night of casting off the old, welcoming in the new, we return home to our seven-year-old, Hannah. *For this child I have prayed.* We bend over her bed. How do we look to her at this age? How will we look to her when she’s 17? Fortunately, she is asleep, and those questions can wait till the morning.