

"Holy to the LORD" -- Zechariah 3:1-5

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Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

Emmett, Idaho

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Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Dear Baptized,

So, how's it going? Good day? Bad day? You're looking good. All dressed up in your Sunday best. You see, we've got an extra moment here this morning and before the reading of the sermon text we could consider something that's in the news. Hmm. Okay, here's something. Have you noticed any of those people with turbans on their heads, who travel here and walk there across this great land, those pilgrims who journey to and fro in an alien world? Something else, right? I mean really, who are these people? ... and what's that turban all about, anyway?

Alright, let's get going here. The sermon text for today is Zechariah 3:1-5. Please listen to that portion of God's inspired and inerrant Word under the theme of ...

... Holy to the LORD.

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD Who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?" Now Joshua was standing before the Angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the Angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him He said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with rich apparel." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments; and the Angel of the LORD was standing by.

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

Very often in the Holy Bible, the dealings of God with man are in legal terms. We use such words as "judgment," "guilty," "righteous," "pardon," and so on. The Scriptures often describe God as a righteous judge (Psalm 7:11). In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the Son of Man - Jesus the Christ - will one day come in glory to sit on His Divine Throne to render judgment; that is, to separate the LORD's own from those who are not His people (Matthew 25:31ff). In the words of the Athanasian Creed Jesus, Who ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty; "from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

To the prophet Zechariah, the LORD God revealed His Word in the form of visions. The sermon text is a portion of the fourth vision that the prophet received and wrote, and among all of the visions given to Zechariah, this might be considered the most beautiful one, for it leads us into the very heart

of the holy, catholic, that is, Christian faith. This vision presents us with the scene of a court room. Imagine the setting of a court in session - with the Angel of the LORD - with the Son of God as the Judge. Standing before the Judge is the high priest - a man named the common name of Joshua (or "Yeshua" or in the Greek, "Jesus - a name that means "savior").

This is the high priest, who for one thing or another stands before the LORD God on behalf of and representing the faithful followers in the congregation. The high priest stands before the Judge of the universe in the Divine Court. As such, each one of us stands before God in just the same way. He created us and every one of us is answerable and accountable to Him and to Him alone. He is our Judge - a judge who is completely fair, always righteous, absolutely holy. This Judge - this Christ - demands perfection and threatens eternal punishment for anyone who is not able to live up to, to speak up to and to think up to God's holy Law. The Judge is seated at the bench and the high priest is standing in front of Him. Standing at the right side of the high priest is Satan. The Devil is ready to accuse the high priest, Jeshua.

It is one of the characteristics of the Deceiver to accuse. It is his habitual, unceasing activity. Just as Satan did to the high priest in this vision, so also does he do to us. We are constantly being reminded that our sinful nature means we aren't good enough to be in God's holy Presence. In addition, Lucifer brings to light our sins and in response, we often dwell on the ones that plague us the most. He does this to drive a wedge between you and your Lord. Satan is the great Temptor who uses the fact that we are sinners in order to stand ready to accuse us. His claim is that we are not worthy - because of what we have done, not done and continue to do - not worthy to stand before the Judge. The Devil has judged us as guilty and is accusing us before God Himself. Satan has a solid case with all manner of evidence against us.

The high priest is dressed in a robe that is absolutely filthy. It is completely dirty from the activities and the work that the priest had been doing. This filthy and foul-smelling garment represents the sinfulness of man. Each person - man, woman, youth, newborn - stands in just such a robe. Each one is stained by unrighteous and selfish thoughts, words and deeds. Our garments are soiled, not only by what we do and fail to do, say and fail to say, think and fail to think, but they are stained from the inside out by what we are. We are, by nature, sinful and unclean. We are clothed in filthy robes as we stand before God and beside Satan who is ready to accuse us.

Satan is quite sure of gaining his point, of accusing us and acquiring us for his kingdom of hell. How can the holy God change His own judgment of condemnation that has been repeated time and time again? The soul that sins shall die. With bold and brazen shamelessness he appears before God and arrogantly places himself at the right hand of Joshua in order to present his charges. After all, using nothing but the facts, was not the high priest clothed in filthy, evil-smelling garments with the odor of death rising from him? Aren't these dirty clothes solid evidence that Joshua was a sinner and therefore utterly unqualified, not only to be the high priest, but even disqualified to be a member of the Kingdom of God?

Satan stands ready to challenge the LORD's own institution for the forgiveness of sins - to deny the right of God to pardon the sinner. The Devil seeks to overthrow God's Grace (which is so hateful to him) and to turn it into a seat of judgment and condemnation - to fashion a unitarian god like Allah who renders judgment and orders execution and in whom there is no grace, mercy and peace, and from whom there are no means of grace, mercy and peace. With one accusation this Deceiver plots a course to obtain the child of God as his victim and fellow prisoner in the lake of fire.

He seeks the same end for all and therefore, for you and your children. He attempts to put doubt in your mind with his trickery. The one who originally told a half-truth in the Garden of Eden ("for in the day you eat of it you will be like God knowing good and evil" [Gen. 3:5]) has a half-point as he stands at the right side of Joshua. The evil one maintains that Joshua is sinful, that he has sinned, that he is guilty, that he deserves to die. All true, but this is only a part of the truth. There is an old Yiddish proverb that speaks of this, the latest example being what was heard from Yankee Stadium on September 23rd as many gods were invoked, worshiped and prayed to. The proverb states that "a half-truth is a whole lie." In these latter days of loose and sagging morals, of a Bloodless gospel and whimpering clergy who fail to make both confession of sin and confession of the faith, sin is still sin. In the eyes of the One true God, wrong is wrong even if the world applauds you. Sin is sin even if others are doing worse things. Wicked is wicked even if you do it for a seemingly good cause. Satan is aware of this, and stands ready to accuse us with these facts just as he did with the high priest.

However, before Satan can utter a single word, the Judge - the Angel of the LORD - foils the fallen angel's wicked scheme. He directs His Word at Satan and says, "The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD Who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you!" The LORD, Who has chosen His Church, and Who owes to no one any apology or explanation of His reasons for providing salvation to people, orders Satan to back off - to keep his mouth shut. The LORD continues to drive Satan back by asking him a question, "Is not this a brand taken from the fire?" In other words, isn't this one whom I have saved from the eternal fire? Isn't this one who has been given the gift of faith in the LORD God?

The high priest is a man who had been brought to faith and who trusted in the promised Messiah as the LORD. He was one of the elect citizens of Jerusalem the Golden, the City of God that had been chosen. Though he, a man like each of us, was a sinful man clothed in rags of unrighteousness, yet he could rejoice, just as you and I can rejoice that God did not allow us to be cast into the outer darkness because we were clothed in sin.

God's plan for the salvation of man - the unconditional Promise given to Adam and Eve of the promised Seed Who would crush the head of the Devil - required the Incarnation of the Son of God. Upon Him would all the filthy garments of the world population be cast, those unrighteous rags of sin would be draped over the outstretched arms of the crucified Christ. God "made Him Who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). He was numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many" (Isaiah 53:12). This Jesus died your death due you on account of that filthy, unrighteous robe of sin that is yours and of your own doing, that you might have His Life and the robe of perfect righteousness that brings it. On the third day, in defeat of death and in demonstration of the full pardon, the Angel of the LORD Incarnate arose from the tomb. Job's Redeemer lives.

The Angel of the LORD - that is, the Judge of the Universe - then instructs those standing before Him to remove the filthy garments from Joshua. Here is the full Absolution of the sinner. This is the Declaration that every trace of iniquity, every spot of sin and every stain of guilt has been removed.

In your Baptism, the filthy garment of sin was removed from you. When you were baptized, God granted you the faith in Him that trusts such Word of God and you are now perfect in His sight. As you and I confessed our sins this morning and heard the Word of forgiveness, those wretched robes, befouled from within and stained from the sins of the week and of the weak, were taken from us and

replaced by the perfectly white robe of Christ's redemption. Once again, in the Holy Communion that our Lord instituted, we receive the forgiveness of our sins as our souls are washed in the Blood of Christ.

That's what this stunning moment in the court room reveals to us. For you see, not only is the Angel of the LORD our defense attorney, not only is He our Judge ("for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" [2 Corinthians 5:10]), He is also our Redeemer and Benefactor Who paid the price we owed. Thus He was, and is able to make the following proclamation that applied to Joshua and to us as well: "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe with rich apparel!"

The Angel of the LORD commands those standing before Him, that is, His servants, to remove Joshua's filthy garments and to clothe him with festive garments. This is the Judgment handed down by the highest court - the real Supreme Court: "Behold, I have taken your iniquity (your sins) away from you." They are not held against you. I have removed them as far as the east is from the west. I remember your sins no more. Here is the withheld judgment whereby one's record is spotless.

It is important to note that Joshua did not have to wait either to have the old garment removed, or to have the new, clean robe put on. There are no conditions on the righteousness that God in Christ bestows. Therefore, cleansing and forgiveness are instantaneously undergone and applied. The festive robe of Christ's righteousness is the uniform of the day at the King's Banquet and these are and will be the ones who have "washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:14).

Having justified Joshua, having declared him cleansed from sin and acceptable to God, the Angel of the LORD retains him in his office despite the accusations of Satan and despite the fact that Joshua remains sinner as well as saint. God orders a clean turban be placed upon the head of this priest, a turban with certain words written on it. The placement of this turban indicates that God wants Joshua to return to his work. Being declared righteous and free from the penalty of sin does not relieve the man from the responsibilities of his work. He is to return to his Call.

Joshua stood before the Bench of God justified. Satan stood rebuke by the LORD. What Satan could not comprehend, and what surpasses all understanding, is the truth so clearly taught here ... that the God of absolute holiness, justice and righteousness, is at the same time, the God of grace, mercy and peace.

Zechariah states at the end of the vision revealed to him by the Holy Spirit, that "the Angel of the LORD was standing by." What a comfort these final few words are. Following the announcement of forgiveness and the restoration to the call, the faithful high priest has the promise that God is ever present and always ready to cleanse his soiled robes and to garnish him with festive apparel ... always ready to rebuke Satan on our behalf ... constantly standing by even to the end of the age.

Joshua the high priest represents all the people of God and what is true for him is true for all the LORD's children. You are declared clean and free from the penalty of your sins. You are robed with Christ's righteousness and you have a turban with certain words written on it. You are called to be about your various vocations. And of your failures to fulfill the Law? And of your sins that stain your soul? Well, "the Angel of the LORD is standing by," with His festive robe to cover you.

So, how's it going? Good day? Bad day? Are you all dressed up in your Sunday best, that is, with the robe of Christ's righteousness and with that turban with those certain words written on it? What words? These: "Holy to the LORD" (Exodus 39:30-31). These were originally written in Hebrew and then translated into Greek and now into English.

By the way, have you noticed any of those people with turbans on their heads, who travel here and walk there across this great land, those pilgrims who journey to and fro in this alien world? Some of them have turbans on their heads just like you have, that is, with the words "Holy to the LORD" written on them. But some of them don't have those certain words written on them and will die forever without them. Part of our vocation is to take this Good News to those whose turbans bear Allah inscriptions that they might be replaced with "Holy to the LORD" written in Arabic. This will happen when they come to faith in Christ Jesus and hear what is declared to you ... namely, you are forgiven in the Name of the Father and the (+) Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.