Our text from Isaiah 61 includes the words of a prophet who exulted in God because the Lord had “clothed [him] with the garments of salvation [and] covered [him] with the robe of righteousness.” That sure sounds like protective clothing: Gore-Tex from God if you will. As we read into the next chapter of Isaiah, we gather that the prophet meant this metaphor to be a collective one. God provided the garments of salvation and the robes of righteousness for the whole people of Judah. Following the end of the Babylonian exile, the people returned to their homeland, where said God, “for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch” (62:1).

The person of God would come among God’s people and make things right. So, the people needed to be properly attired and protectively clothed? Israel understood the collapse of their nation and the long exile that followed to be a judgment from God for their sins. In fact, earlier when Isaiah spoke of that coming disaster and captivity, he said the people would “enter the caverns of the rocks and the clefts in the crags, from the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth” (Isaiah 2:21).

But by the time of today’s passage from Isaiah, that catastrophe is in the past, and if the people are to recover in any meaningful way, they need to believe that when God looks at them now, God sees not their sins, but their righteousness. According to Isaiah, to make sure that happens, God himself, the divine clothier, gives them robes of righteousness. This is not to make the people fashion statements, but to make them able to survive the brutal “weather” conditions of God’s presence.

The notion that we need protection from God, and that God provides it, appears elsewhere in Scripture, too. After the people of Israel worshiped the golden calf and God punished them, Moses interceded for them with God. In that conversation, Moses said to God, “Show me your glory.” God agreed to make God’s goodness pass before Moses, but God told Moses that he could not allow Moses to see God’s face, “for no one shall see me and live.” So, God put Moses in a cleft of a rock and covered Moses with his hand (Exodus 33:18-23).

The idea that God is dangerous can also be seen in C.S. Lewis’ book, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, where the Susan and Lucy ask about Aslan the lion [who represents Jesus]: “Is he safe?” Beaver replies, “Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

Further on in the book, Lewis writes, “People who have not been in Narnia sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time. If the children had ever thought so, they were cured of it now. For when they tried to look at Aslan’s face, they just caught a glimpse of the golden mane and the great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes; and then they found they couldn’t look at him and went all trembly.”

Now consider the experience of Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the Nazi death camps. If ever there was a dangerous environment, that was it. Frankl writes about the things that the Nazis, with all their evil power, could not take away. He recalls men living in the camps with him, who, despite starving themselves, nonetheless walked through the huts comforting others, and giving away their last piece of bread. He saw that as evidence of one human freedom that no earthly power can take away: the freedom “to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.” So even the worst that can happen in this world cannot take everything from us.

But God can take even that final freedom, and that makes God dangerous. Which is perhaps why Frankl writes that for those like him who had not yet been killed when the Allies liberated the camp inmates, there was “the wonderful feeling that, after all he has suffered, there is nothing he need fear anymore — except his God.”

It is not that God has anger issues. Rather, as commentator Steven J. Cole, puts it, “[God’s] wrath is his settled opposition to all sin. [God’s] holiness requires that he must judge all sin.” God’s anger is set firmly against sin, but Vole’s statement is incomplete, because it overlooks the Gore-Tex of righteousness that God offers us. God does not force us to wear the garments of salvation or the robe of righteousness. They are offered freely, but God leaves it up to us whether to wear them: a freedom of choice, of our own “freewill.” As the apostle Peter said, “The Lord is…patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Regardless of what we do wrong, the only way to cut ourselves off from God’s invitation is to not respond to it, to refuse the divine protective clothing.

Freewill means that since we have a choice in the matter of our destiny, not to choose is to choose. This is a fact we would probably eliminate from our religion if we could. We do not like being backed into a corner where we have to say “yes” or “no.” Faith would be so much easier if it just spoke words of comfort or encouragement. Instead, faith confronts us with a choice: either to accept Christ or not. Christ’s gospel deals with real life issues, so it asks us to commit ourselves. God simply will not be satisfied with anything less. There is no middle ground. And so, the choice is ours.

Prayer: God of love, source of mercy and compassion, weave your dream for the world into the fabric of our lives. Remove the scales from our eyes and lift the indifference from our hearts, so that we may see your vision – a new reign of justice and compassion that will renew the earth. Transform our lives, so that we may accomplish your purpose. Anoint us with your spirit of love that we might bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim release to the captive. Give us a new urgency and a new commitment to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, and visit those who live in isolation. Help us to reach out to those whom no one else will touch, to accept the unacceptable, and to embrace the enemy. Surround us with your love, fill us with your grace, and strengthen us for your service. Empower us to respond to the call of Jesus – to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and to follow. Make us your disciples. Amen

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**The Gore-Tex of Righteousness**

Sunday, December 27, 2020 Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Gore-Tex is a modern fabric with remarkable qualities. Gore-Tex sheds water to keep wearers from getting soaked by rain. Gore-Tex also expels water vapor and heat to keep wearers from getting soaked by sweat. Gore-Tex refines this cutting-edge technology by constantly testing new fabrics in a $5 million biophysics chamber at its Elkton, Maryland, research-and-development facility. The chamber can replicate 85 percent of the Earth’s weather, including a full solar cycle from sunrise to sunset, heavy rains, full blizzard conditions, and can produce humidity ranging from 5 percent to 98 percent.

Inside the lab, a mannequin named Walter tests prototypes of outdoor apparel. Walter himself is a technological marvel. He can run in place, and he has sensors on his body to measure sweat rate, skin temperature, and range of motion. But Gore-Tex needs human testers, too, people willing to wear heart-rate monitors and swallow pill-size thermometers to measure their core temperature, while running on inclined treadmills. Walter gives great and reliable data, but human testers provide feedback on how the garment feels; if a garment functions well but feels like sandpaper, people are not going to wear it.

Clothing that protects us from storms and other less-than-ideal conditions is a reasonable metaphor for how to live in the presence of God, who is both essential and dangerous. We do not often think of God as dangerous. We talk so much about the love of God for us that we forget that the Bible also talks about the justice and judgment of God, and not just in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the book of Hebrews tells us: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31). And it was Jesus who told his disciples, “Don’t be bluffed into silence or insincerity by the threats of religious bullies. True, they can kill you, but then what can they do? There’s nothing they can do to your soul, your core being. Save your fear for God, who holds your entire life — body and soul — in his hands” (Luke 12:4-5, *The Message*).