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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/27/2015, Christmas 1C
The Word: Dwelling Richly in Us

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My main text for this sermon is from our Epistle Lesson, from Colossians 3:16:

¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... (Colossians 3:16, RSV)

I begin this sermon with a couple opening paragraphs from my sermon for this same Sunday three years ago.¹ I repeat these paragraphs because I am intrigued by the idea of parents wanting their children to grow up well. So I repeat these opening paragraphs, though I want to take this sermon off in a somewhat different direction from the one I preached three years ago. In particular, I want all of us children, whether we are young or old, to grow up well. My theme is that to do so, we should seek that the word of Christ should dwell in us this coming year even more richly than ever before.

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This Sunday's Bible readings speak of two good children: Samuel of old, and Jesus. What better can be asked of a child than what was said of both Samuel and Jesus, in almost the exact same words:

And Jesus [like Samuel before him] increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:52, RSV)

More than silver and gold or any other treasure this old world can name, this is what parents really want: they want their little ones to grow up both in stature and in favor with God and with humanity. For if that be true of them—that they are strong both in body and soul—then they will be living with Jesus and heading to heaven. Every other wish we might have for our children pales and fades away in comparison to this eternal blessing: that our kids should make it to heaven to live with Jesus there.

And so, how very earnestly parents can sing on behalf of their children the third verse of *Away in a Manger*:

¹ My sermon for Christmas 1C 12/30/2012.

Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask you to stay
close by me forever and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in your tender care
and fit us for heaven, to live with you there.

That's what I'm after in this sermon: that for all God's children—you, me, our sons and daughters, indeed, everyone!—our Lord Jesus will “fit us for heaven, to live with him there.” We need to be formed and refashioned and crafted after the image of Christ. Or, to use the imagery of this morning's Epistle Reading, we need to be fitted for a new set of clothes. We need the robes of righteousness.

We have the imagery of the tailor, then, in this reading from Colossians. St. Paul gives us concrete moral exhortation about how to renew our spiritual lives and to make ourselves fit for heaven. It seems to be a matter of our daily clothing. St. Paul puts it this way:

¹²*Put on* then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience,
¹³forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these *put on* love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. (Colossians 3:12-15, RSV)

As we stretch out our arms in the morning through the sleeves of our shirt or blouse, so we should stretch forth our arms, day by day, into the robes of righteousness. We should head out into the day that lies ahead of us all decked out with compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love and peace. For these are the traits of Jesus. He manifested them as a twelve-year old boy, he lived with them his whole life, and he is clothed with them still even now as our living Savior and Lord.

I think the key to this putting on of the robes of righteousness is to be found in my main text — verse 16 of Colossians 3. In the earlier verses of that chapter, Saint Paul speaks of putting on various virtues – the virtues I have already mentioned: compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, patience, and so. But it is in verse 16 that I believe we find the source of these virtues:

¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... (Colossians 3:16, RSV)

Here we are on the edge of new year of our Lord. If we make new year resolutions, let this be a good one for us: that we mean to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly this coming year.

To do so, means that we should grow in earnestness about Jesus. The apostle says that we should let the word of Christ “dwell in us.” Indeed, we should let the word dwell in us “richly.” Dwelling is different from visiting. It cannot be said that the word of Christ “dwells” in us if we permit that word to make only a brief appearance in our lives. If that word enters one ear and soon goes out through the other, well, that’s not quite “dwelling” in us. If we come to church and listen to the Bible readings and the sermon, but soon forget all about them, then I do not think we can say that the word of Christ is richly dwelling in us. It is more like the word of Christ is briefly passing through our lives. That’s good. It is good that the word of God should visit with us for a while. But it is even better if it should dwell with us. This indwelling of the word of Christ is what fits us for heaven and permits us to put on the robes of righteousness.

The ardor and love of Christ that new converts have is a wonderful thing. To see a life transformed and improved by Jesus is a beautiful thing on earth, bringing benefits both to the new believer and to the people around that one. Alas, if the word of God fades away from the new believer, then that person might well drift back into old and poor ways of life. But let that word “dwell richly” in that new believer, then this world is in for some good times, for a more Christ-like person will be among us.

This means that the initial ardor and love of Christ should continue by way of discipline. Or the ardor and love of Christ that we might have had in the past, but lost, should be regained through discipline and increasing earnestness about Jesus.

That Bible on our bookshelf: Is it dusty? Is it stiff from being opened so little? And the characters inside the Bible: have we made ourselves acquainted with them? Have we admired the virtue of Joseph in Egypt, the patience of Job, the courage of Daniel in the lion’s den, the fitful but ultimate faithfulness of St. Peter? Above all, have we remembered Jesus? Have we taken him with us from church on Sunday morning to work and home the rest of the week?

In this fallen world, we will never make ourselves *worthy* of heaven. But we might well make ourselves more *fit* for heaven. I mean, if we should suddenly find ourselves in heaven, are we going to be stunned by that? Are we going to say, “Well, I never! I never planned on this, never prepared myself for it, never much thought about heaven and heaven’s Lord, Jesus Christ.”

²In this morning’s Christmas story, we find that Mary and Joseph have raised a son who is indeed fit for heaven. Young Jesus fulfills the desire of all pious parents. They have raised a boy who loves the Lord with all his heart and mind and soul. Even at just twelve-years of age, Jesus serves as an example for us of what I urging upon you and me too: young Jesus is someone who has let the Word of God dwell richly within him.

² The next few paragraphs also come from my sermon from December 30, 2012.

There is some sadness in this for Mary and Joseph. When they at last find their boy in the Temple, Mary tells him that she and Joseph had searched for him “anxiously.” Scholars point out that the word Mary uses here – anxiously – expresses anxiety with pain.³ There is distress in Mary’s voice as she greets her son:

⁴⁸And when they saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you *anxiously*.” (Luke 2:48, RSV)

Mary and Joseph had been sick at heart as they searched for Jesus. And when they at last found him, they discover that in a way, they had lost him for good, for Jesus was taking his stand with his heavenly Father, even above his earthly mother and father:

⁴⁹And he said to them, “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I *must* be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49, RSV)

The inevitable separating of child from parents can be a painful process for both parties. It is part of growing up. The child steps back and surveys the parents. It is as if the child says, “I like this in my parents, and I like that. But this, I do not like! I don’t want that to be part of my life.” And so it is that the child chooses his or her own path in life.

At least in the case of Jesus we see that when he takes his stand *apart* from his parents, he takes his stand *with* God. And Mary and Joseph are no doubt grateful for that.

Jesus never fell away from his whole-hearted love for his heavenly Father. All his life he lived in favor with God, if not always with men.

The meaning of Christmas for daily life is that you and I should follow his example. We should do as the Christmas carol says: we should seek to be “fit for heaven, to live with him there.”

I believe that the apostolic exhortation to let the word of Christ dwell richly in us in good counsel for us as we face a new year and as we face a world that that could really use our help -- could really use some people who are earnest about Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

³ Peter Marty in *The Lectionary Commentary*, on Luke 2:41-52, page 306.