

## Title: “The Shirt”

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1 John 4:9-10, 16

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**Service Readings:** Is. 7:10-14, 1 John 4:7-16, Matthew 1:18-25

### Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

There was once a man. He was a normal, ordinary kind of man. There was nothing special about him. He had a wife, he had children, he had friends... you know, just..... normal.

And each year, usually the evening before Christmas, his family would reach into their closets in search of their holiday church clothes. He always stressed just a little as he donned his shirt that had hung untouched for a year. He hadn't grown taller this past year, but he wasn't sure if he had grown wider. And so he would take a deep breath, mostly because of stress but also because it seemed to help him fit into his shirt, and he would pray that for this night, at least, his clothing would feel comfortable on him. And when everyone was dressed, he would gather them all into the family car and together they would travel the short distance to the church.

Now, he had grown up in this town, as had his wife, but neither had ever participated in any kind of worship until after they were married and welcomed their first child. He wasn't really sure what started the conversation but at some point, those many years ago they decided that church would be a “good thing” for the family and so began their search. Over the several months of their exploration, they tried different denominations but found that none of them “fit” very comfortably. Many of the churches had things that they both liked, but no church had everything. Some had wonderful music, some had charismatic preachers, and some had wonderful youth programs. But none had them all.

Eventually they settled on a church and began attending, but only a few times that first year. And the next year they attended only during Easter morning and Christmas Eve. And that became their tradition from then on.

And so this evening he dressed in preparation for the service he would attend. His shirt still fit, but was noticeably more uncomfortable than in years past.

During the service his eye caught the manger scene and he noticed the baby Jesus in the hay. An unexpected thought entered into his mind: as he looked in the manger, all he saw was a baby, but that's not what this church saw. They saw a miracle in the making.

Although he had not attended church very frequently, he had attended enough to know the general story of God, the general story of Jesus. In fact, at this very moment, the pastor was reading from the Bible:

<sup>9</sup>In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins...

<sup>16</sup> So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

This was the promised son that God sent to save the world. This was the one who died on the cross to do exactly that. This man had attended enough Easter services to know that Christ's resurrection was a huge deal for Christians, even if he didn't fully understand all of it.

And these thoughts continued to tug at him: *He* sees a baby on Christmas but *they* see a miracle in the works. And this miracle? Well, that was a difficult one to identify, for it seems to him that there was not one, but several miracles. First, God the Father sent his son. But Jesus is also God. How does he even begin to process this miracle? And then this God and man took upon himself the sins of the world? There's the second miracle. And through his suffering God has forgiven us our sins. Miracle number three. And who can forget his resurrection? No wonder they see a miracle lying in the manger, for what else could you call it?

Instinctively he tugged at the sleeve of his shirt for it was creeping past his wrist. This shirt! It just didn't fit any longer. And then it hit him. Is it possible, maybe even just a little possible, that he was experiencing the same thing with Christianity? Could it be that this shirt represents who he is and what he believes? Could it be that he is outgrowing the shirt just like he is outgrowing his tepidness of Jesus? He became even more uncomfortable the longer that thought lingered in his mind. Could it be possible, even just a little, that there was a fifth miracle in the works? A miracle that was happening within his very own heart this Christmas eve?

He silently pondered this for many days, for what would it mean to be drawn deeper into this Christian thing? The proverbial shirt that started this all would have to be... what.... discarded? If so, what would it be replaced with? How would *that* shirt fit? *Would* it fit or would he have to change it, also? He knew the answer to that last question, even if he was not ready to admit it to himself. He recalled the verse from that Christmas service: "<sup>15</sup> Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God." This passage made it very clear, at least to him: of *course* he would change, that's what happens when God takes residence in someone! And so, it wasn't the act of *changing* that concerned him, it was the *outcome* of that change. *What* would he be changed into? Or, as he had heard somewhere, what would he be *transformed* into?

He didn't know the answers to these questions but he knew that he probably should. And he figured that the place to start would be in understanding the shirt he was currently wearing - the proverbial one that was making him uncomfortable. The one that was constraining him, tightening around him the longer he thought about Jesus.

I'd like to exit the story here as he begins to search for answers to his questions, and turn my attention to you. Maybe many of you cannot relate to this man. Maybe you have grown up in church; you have a rich understanding of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus. Maybe the shirt you wear is not a shirt, but a robe of righteousness. And maybe you even know what that phrase means. And for you, each and every week you attend a church service and are spiritually fed. But for others, church is little more than a baby in the manger and the miracle is invisible to them. But they come to worship, even if it is only a couple times a year, because they know deep down that it is more than a baby, even if they don't know what that "more" even is.

For you, maybe the shirt of Christianity feel uncomfortable. Maybe you don't know why, and maybe you don't even know *how* it feels uncomfortable, but you know that it *just does*. You stress every Christmas when that shirt makes itself known to you, when that shirt clothes you. You want it to fit, you want it to feel comfortable, but then again, you are not sure that you *do*. Because just like this man, you are afraid that the comfort you are longing for will come at a price, and that the price will be too high. You are afraid that you will be changed, even transformed. And you are scared that you may not even recognize yourself.

My message to you this evening is this: I don't know. I simply don't know how your life will change. I can proclaim to you the hope that you can cling to in Jesus for eternal life, but that is not your immediate concern. Your concern is much more personal, much more intimate. Will your friends continue to know you? Will they continue to like you? Will you be discarding a shirt that you have lived in your whole life, a shirt that until recently you have been comfortable wearing, for something that will make your life less comfortable? Will it make your life even worse? *These* are the concerns that you have and they are the same ones that this man has. And I simply don't know how to answer them. But one thing I can promise you is this: The church will walk with you – *The people of St. Mark* will walk with you on your journey. You will not be alone, for you are surrounded, even tonight, with people who love and care for you, people who want to guide you as you search for answers. Please don't set this aside for another day. It is Christmas Eve. It is the time for a new shirt. Don't look in the manger and see a baby. Look in the manger and see a miracle in the making – a miracle that you are a part of, right this very moment.

And for you who call St. Mark your church home, be intentional about seeking and finding those who might be searching for that new shirt. Make caring connections and walk with them on their journey. Help them see that they are part of the miracle in the making.

Please pray with me.

Gracious God, we thank You for Your love and mercy that You have shown to us in Christ Jesus. We pray for those who do not yet know you, but are seeking you in their hearts. Draw them to yourself by your Holy Spirit, and reveal to them the truth and beauty of your gospel. Lead them to Your church, where they may find support and guidance from your Word and Sacraments. Grant them faith and repentance, and make them your children and heirs of eternal life.

Amen.