



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

From Cruddy Clothes to Royal Robes

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I would like to share with you the most embarrassing story of my life. It was my freshman year in college. I was working in the college cafeteria on a Saturday morning, and I was replacing a bag of milk by the cereal bar when I accidentally pulled the nozzle off the bag. The bag exploded and five gallons of milk came rushing out. Trust me when I say five gallons is a lot of milk. Milk was all over the counter, all over the floor, and all over my pants. At 11 AM on a Saturday, the cafeteria was filled with hundreds of students who applauded. I started cleaning up the milk, wiping it and mopping it into a five-gallon bucket, and then I opened the milk machine to clean that too. You know where this is going. I knocked over the bucket and spilled all of the milk again. Lucky for you, I even have a photo of this horrifying moment. Anyone who says it is not worth crying over spilled milk has never spilled five gallons of milk twice! Color rushed to my cheeks as I finished my shift in my milk-saturated jeans. I wanted to disappear, and I quit that job the next day.

Now, hopefully, you haven't spilled forty pounds of milk in front of hundreds of people. But we've all had embarrassing, shame-filled moments: a burp in public, a wardrobe malfunction at an important meeting, or maybe asking a stupid question in class. We know the feeling of blood rushing to our faces and all eyes staring at us. The thing about embarrassing

moments, though, is that the feeling eventually goes away. In fact, in my senior year of college, I won an award for the “Best Embarrassing Moment.” It became a fun story!

But some events cause a feeling that is more intense than embarrassment. This feeling has the power to make the blood rush to our heads and our skin crawl decades after the moment happened. My other most embarrassing moment was when I was a 7-year-old second grader and I headbutted a girl named Margo. Who does that? But unlike my milk story, when I ran into Margo seven years later, I felt all the same embarrassed, humiliating emotions as if it happened yesterday. You might know this feeling. Maybe it was that hurtful thing you said in an argument. Maybe it was that really bad breakup a few years ago. Maybe it was something you did in secret 20 years ago that no one knows about. When these moments come into our minds, even years later, we still get that skin-crawly, gut-squirmy feeling. We call that feeling shame.

Medical doctor Curt Thompson wrote a book on shame called *The Soul of Shame*, in which he describes the feeling of shame like this: “There’s something wrong with me,” or, “I’m not enough.” Shame produces thoughts like “I don’t work hard enough”; “I’ll never be good enough”; or especially this one: “If someone really knew me and knew what I did, they’d never love me.” Maybe it’s not something you did, but something done to you. Sadly, traumas like abuse or betrayal are far more common than we think, and we don’t talk about them often. But even though they’re not our fault, they can leave the same shame-filled feelings. Whether it’s something you did, or something done to you, all of us have feelings of shame we keep hidden from our presentable lives, just like how we stuff everything into a closet when company comes over. We all have a secret closet of shame in our souls.

If anything about that rings a bell for you, then you're in a good place. Our story today talks about God's response to shame. It is from the Old Testament book of Zechariah. Zechariah was a prophet, and prophets were messengers from God bringing good news to the people. It was about 520 BC, and the city of Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed by Babylon about seventy years before. God has promised in Zechariah 1:16 to restore the city: *"I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and my house will be rebuilt."* Zechariah prophesied that two men, Joshua the priest and Zerubbabel the governor, would rebuild the destroyed temple. This was a big deal! The temple was the sign that God would be present with His people again and would fulfill His promises. But then Zechariah has a dream about the high priest, Joshua. And in a moment, it looked like everything would come crashing down. Let's read Zechariah chapter 3.

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. ²And 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?" ³Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. ⁴And 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 pure vestments." ⁵And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the LORD was standing by.

⁶And the angel of the LORD solemnly assured Joshua, ⁷"Thus says the LORD of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here. ⁸Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign: behold, I will

bring my servant the Branch. ⁹For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day. ¹⁰In that day, declares the LORD of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree.”

Zechariah 3 (ESV)

Zechariah is a *weird* book. In other chapters, there are crazy things like a woman flying around in a basket, multicolored horses, and stones with eyes. Zechariah is a prophet, and prophets were God’s special servants who were given messages for God’s people. In Zechariah’s case, God gave him these messages primarily in dreams. I don’t know about you, but my dreams can be bizarre, especially if I have had too much ice cream before going to bed. Unlike my dreams, though, Zechariah’s weird dreams are full of symbolism; there’s a point behind the strangeness. But it can be confusing, so we’ll need to take some time to untangle it. We’ll go through Zechariah’s dream in three parts today: first, the crud; then, the cleanse; and finally, the call.

First, the crud. Zechariah’s dream has an odd start. He has a vision of a heavenly courtroom, where the devil is putting the high priest, Joshua, on trial before God. What’s his reasoning? We’re told in verse 3 that Joshua is wearing filthy robes. Now, a wardrobe malfunction is embarrassing, but an accusation by the devil seems like a bit of an overreaction.

It might help if we get a little background on the high priest. The Bible teaches that because of sin there is a separation between God and human beings. A Holy God can’t be in relationship with sinful people any more than your red clothes can be in relationship with your white clothes in a washing machine. As a solution, God created the role of the high priest who functioned as a “bridge” to God. To have a relationship

with God, you went through the priest. A good example is described in Leviticus 16, in a ritual called the *Day of Atonement*. First, the priest would “*make atonement for himself and for his house*” (Lev 16:6). Then, he would

...lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness.”

Lev 16:21

That’s where we get the term “Scapegoat.” The goat would carry people’s sins into the wilderness. Their sins were forgiven, and they were in right relationship with God.

But there’s another key part to this story. In Leviticus 16:4, we’re told:

[The priest] should put on the holy linen coat and shall have the linen undergarment on his body ... these are holy garments. He shall bathe himself in water and then put them on.

In other words, for the priest to function as the bridge between God and people, the priest himself had to be clean. If the priest were unclean, if the priest were sinful, or if the priest weren’t holy, the bridge would fall apart.

Now do you see the problem? Joshua doesn’t have holy garments. He has filthy garments! In fact, it’s worse than it seems. The Hebrew word translated here as “filthy” only shows up in two other places in the Old Testament. In one place it’s translated as “excrement,” and in the other, it’s translated as “human dung.” My sermon title “cruddy clothes” is a euphemism. But “excrement-y” clothes or “dung-y” clothes

don't make for a great sermon title. Here's the point: Joshua's clothes aren't dirty because they're covered with dirt. They're filthy because they are covered with bodily filth. That's a problem! For the high priest to be the bridge to God, he must be clean and holy. Joshua is ritually unclean, and according to Jewish law, he would need to go through a cleansing process. He can't clean himself, that would be like trying to clean your bathroom when you have raw meat in your hands. As a result, he can't do the job of the priest. He can't connect the people to God.

You can almost hear Satan's voice in this story. "You want this guy to be your priest? Haven't you seen what he is wearing? Don't you see how much this guy has messed up? Don't you see how filthy he is? You really think this guy can build the temple?" You can imagine the shame piling up for Joshua as he thinks about all the bad things he's ever done.

Now, Joshua didn't "literally" wear these robes around; the filthy robes are symbolic of the sin in Joshua's dream. Joshua's filthy garments represent his sins. For decades there hadn't been a Day of Atonement, the yearly ritual to receive forgiveness. For 66 years, all his sins had piled up. Every mean thing he had said, every mistake he had made over the years had piled up. You can almost hear Satan laughing in the temple. Maybe Satan's words started to sink in. "Me, the high priest of this new temple? If they really knew me..."

Let's talk about the devil for a moment. Our modern world sometimes writes the devil off as a fairy tale or a primitive way to explain evil, but the Bible seems to identify the devil as a real character. Satan is a Hebrew word that literally means "an accuser" or "to accuse" or "to be an adversary." It's the same word for a political rival or an enemy warrior. If you

read verse 1 literally, Satan is standing beside Joshua to “Satan” him. He’s an accuser. Satan prays on shame. That’s his nature. And it’s not just Joshua; he does it to us, too. An old preacher, Charles Spurgeon, wrote an amazing sermon on this passage where he calls Satan “an old rascal and a coward who goes for God’s people when they are down.” It’s good for the soul to read what 19th-century preachers once said. But Spurgeon’s point is that when we are down and discouraged in our worst moments, we can hear the voice of the “old rascal” just like Joshua did. “Don’t you know what you’ve done? Don’t you remember how much you’ve messed up? You think you can be a leader in a church? You think you are worthy of a good marriage—a good career? Don’t you see the sinful habit you’re stuck in? Haven’t you noticed your cruddy clothes?” This is what Satan does to you and to me.

Shakespeare captures shame brilliantly in *Macbeth*. After committing the act of murder, Lady Macbeth is shown sleep-walking and sleep-washing her hands. She cries, “Will these hands never be clean? There’s the smell of blood still!” Though her act was secret, her conscience carries the guilt. She washed the blood off her hands, but she couldn’t wipe the shame off her conscience. We know this feeling. Whether it’s the emotions when we see a photo of an old relationship come up on our social media feed; the feeling when an old mistake comes to mind; or our inability to kill an old habit, we feel Satan standing and accusing us like Joshua. Many of us carry in the secret closets of our souls our worst moments and our worst memories that tell us that we are not worthy.

I don’t know what your story is. I’m not sure what moments or memories come to mind for you as we talk about shame. But if it rings a bell for you this next part is critical because we see what God does with Joshua’s cruddy clothes.

Let's look at the next section: the cleanse.

Satan has made a compelling case. But then the Lord speaks up in verse 2, *"And the LORD said to Satan, 'The LORD rebuke you, O Satan!'"* And something astounding happens. An angel comes forward and takes his robes saying, *"Remove the filthy garments from him"* (3:4). Hold on! Joshua hasn't done anything to deserve this. He hasn't written his name on the board 10 times. He hasn't done 100 hours of community service. But before Joshua can say a word, the angel interrupts, *"Behold, I have taken away your iniquity and clothed you with pure garments"* (3:4). These priestly robes almost have the connotation of festal or royal robes. You can almost hear Satan sputtering. Joshua's unspeakably filthy clothes have been cast away. He's clothed in righteous, royal, priestly robes. His shame is gone. Suddenly, Joshua is clean, but he didn't do it himself!

The New Testament picks up this image in what Jesus has done for us. According to the New Testament, all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. In Galatians 3:26-27, Paul writes, *"In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith, for as many of you have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ"*—like we "put on" new clothing. According to Paul, we can be in right relationship with God all the time, because Jesus took on our filthy robes, and gave us His righteous clothes. In other words, looking back at our bridge illustration, instead of the priest being the bridge to God—and that only once a year, and wearing his linen undergarments — now Jesus is the bridge to God.

For many of us, this is not how we believe salvation works. We see God's standard as a goal line we need to get to if we want to be loved, to be worthy, and to enter heaven. When we mess up, we think we fall further and further below that line.

When we do good things like go to church or take communion, we get closer to that line, but because we're sinners, we'll never quite get there, so Jesus gives us a little boost to get us the rest of the way. But that is not how the Gospel works. The New Testament tells us that what happened was Jesus lived a perfect life above God's standard, and when He died on the Cross, He traded places with us. Jesus has taken on our filthy robes and given us His royal clothes. Nothing we have done, are doing, or will do can disqualify us from being a child of God. He doesn't see the terrible, awful things we've done. He didn't see Zechariah's filthy robes anymore and He doesn't see ours. This is audacious! There is nothing we can do, past, present, or future that disowns us from God's love or disqualifies us from God's service. It is not about our goodness; it is about the One who was good for us!

Let's break out another old preacher, Martin Luther. Luther frequently struggled with guilt and shame over his brokenness until he had a breakthrough realization in the Gospel. He wrote,

So when the devil throws your sins in your face and declares that you deserve death and hell, tell him this: "I admit that I deserve death and hell, what of it? For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God, and where He is, there I shall be also!"

It doesn't matter what we have done, it matters what He has done. This radically turns upside down what we think about ourselves in God's eyes.

Another beautiful story captures this well. I've mentioned *The Wingfeather Saga* before, a brilliant fantasy series written by Christian author Andrew Peterson. Throughout the first

three books, one-legged grandfather and ex-pirate Podo Helmer harbors a deep secret he keeps from his family, fearing they wouldn't love or accept him if they knew. Finally, in a climactic moment in the third book, it all comes out. His shame is exposed for his family to see, and Podo is on his knees, cringing at the thought that when his family finds out who he really is they will reject him. When he opens his eyes, to his shock and surprise, they don't reject him, they accept him! They love him! Peterson writes this beautiful line: "Podo spent these days in wonder, because for the first time his story was fully known, and he was still loved."

That's the story of the Bible for you and me. According to Pastor Tim Keller, it's the story that in Jesus you are more flawed than you ever imagined, but because of what Jesus has done for you, you are more accepted and loved in Jesus Christ than you ever imagined. Shame will lead you to think things like you're not worthy, you're not good enough, and how could someone love you? But Jesus says, "You are worthy for me to die for you, I was good for you, and I've already committed to love you no matter what you do." Imagine a world of people who believe that story.

That would be a nice place to end. To go from this place and feel uplifted and encouraged, but it is not where our story ends. There is one more critical piece to this story. We've talked about the crud and the cleanse. Now we need to learn about the call.

We read on in verse 7, God speaks to Joshua who is now cleansed and wearing his priestly robes, *"Thus says the LORD of hosts: if you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts..."* In other words, "You look like a priest, now go be a priest. Go do your job I

called you and cleansed you to do. Build the temple. Be my priest to my people." Now that Joshua has been brought into right relationship with God, it's his call to help bring others into right relationship with God. He's been purified for a purpose.

The Old Testament books of Ezra and Haggai are written about the same time as Zechariah, and they tell *us the mission was completed. Ezra tells us the rest of the story. "Zerubbabel...and Joshua... set to work to rebuild the house of God"* (Ezra 5:32), and *"the temple was completed..."* (Ezra 6:15). With Joshua's brokenness cleansed and his filthy clothes taken away, he begins to live out his new call. In his royal robes, he works to reunite Israel with God again after years of exile.

But it's not just Joshua's story. This is about you, too, as Spurgeon points out in the New Testament. The role of the high priest goes away because you and I become a priest! 1 Peter 2:9 says, *"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood."* Through Jesus, we are called to be the people to connect the world to God, through what Jesus has done for us. The Cross is our bridge to God. And it doesn't happen just once a year, it is any time and any place because Christ has sacrificed once and for all. Because of what our High Priest has done for us, we are all like mini priests called and responsible for connecting the world to the God who loves them.

How do we know this is true? We haven't had a vision of our filthy robes being removed by angels so how can we be sure this applies to us? For the answer, we'll look at the last few verses of our Scripture for today. In verse 8, God tells Joshua that the whole thing signifies something bigger. *"Hear now, O Joshua...[this is] a sign: I will bring my servant, the Branch...and I will remove the iniquity of the land in a single day."*

So, God says this whole vision, this whole dream Zechariah is having, is a sign of something greater. Joshua and his friends are a picture of a bigger, better version of this story featuring a character called...the *Branch*. That name would ring a bell for Zechariah, because the Branch is mentioned by other Old Testament prophets. Isaiah prophesied that *"A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit"* (Isa 11:1), and Jeremiah added, *"Behold, the days are coming when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king"* (Jer 23:5). In other words, a Branch would come from the family tree of David, Israel's greatest king. This Branch would bring order, justice, and restoration to the world. And Zechariah adds that this Branch will take away in one day not Joshua's filthy garments, but everyone's filthy garments.

You might know who the Branch is now. The Branch would accomplish these tasks by dying on a tree for you and for me. He would take all the world's filthy garments onto Himself and give us His royal robes. Through Jesus Christ, Joshua's story is true for you and for me, too. *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come"* (2 Cor 5:17).

Pulling these ideas together, this is how we might understand the main idea of today's text: Through Jesus, our past brokenness is a gateway to future service. God's economy turns shame upside down. Our past failures do not disqualify us from following and serving Him. Jesus Christ has taken on our robes and given us His righteousness in exchange. Because of what He has done for us, the very things that we think might disqualify us may just be the way He wants us to go and serve His people. Let me give you a picture of a way this can happen.

In 2015, Major League pitcher Tyler Matzek forgot how to throw a baseball. This is a problem for a baseball pitcher. Matzek had performance anxiety, the dreaded yips: an inexplicable mental condition that renders athletes unable to perform basic tasks. Matzek lost control of the ball, and eventually his performance anxiety destroyed his promising talent. For years, he was out of baseball. Then he got in touch with former Navy SEAL Jason Kuhn. Kuhn had been a former promising major college pitcher whose career had been derailed by the yips. Kuhn subjected Matzek to brutal physical and mental training, including having Matzek throw pitches from the mound while videos of his worst performances were played on large screens. It accomplished its purpose. Matzek could stare his worst moments and biggest failures in the face and remind himself, “Those are things I have done, but it is not who I am.”

Six years after Matzek’s career derailed, my beloved Atlanta Braves were in trouble. They had a one run lead over the Dodgers in the National League Championship Series, but there were runners on second and third with no outs. The pressure was as high as could be. If even one runner scored, the game would be tied and could begin to unravel. The Braves needed a pitcher who could handle the highest level of anxiety in the game. And out of the bullpen came Tyler Matzek. He struck out Albert Pujols, got the next batter to pop out. Then he faced the Dodgers’ best hitter, Mookie Betts. Mookie didn’t stand a chance! Matzek struck him out. The Braves went on to win the game and the World Series. In 2015 Tyler Matzek could not have done it. But the very thing that had broken him wound up being the thing that made him a hero—only “the Matzek” who had gone through the brokenness, the failure, and the ultimate restoration could.

This, friends, is our story. We all have shameful moments,

but Jesus has taken that shame away for us on the Cross. Your past brokenness is a gateway to future service. As some have said, “Your mess can become your message, or your test can become your testimony.” The biggest failures of your life, through Jesus, can be a gateway to encourage other struggling believers. In Christ, your weakness can become your strength. He’s cleansed you. Where is He calling you now? How might Jesus want to turn your cruddy clothes into royal robes? Let me give you a few ideas.

1. **Let Jesus turn grumpiness into gratitude.** This reflects our attitude. Shame tells us we are unworthy and unlovable. Jesus tells us that we’re worthy of the greatest love in the universe. Instead of only reflecting on all the bad things we’ve done a helpful practice this Lent might be to start a “gratitude journal” where each day we write down a few things God has given us for which we’re thankful. An attitude of gratitude can reshape a shamed soul.
2. **Let Jesus turn closed fists into open hands.** Shame makes us hide. Grace makes us shine. One way we might respond in gratitude is through giving to others who are less fortunate, and shame filled whether for something they did, or something done to them. We have a perfect opportunity with our Souper Bowl of Caring offering today. Through tangible resources, we can pass on the same sense of worth and love that God has given us through a Christ-centered mission, the Café of Life.
3. **Let Jesus turn self-deprecation into service.** Joshua’s transformation didn’t stop at a new wardrobe. Despite his brokenness he was called to be God’s priest to humanity. Too often, we tell ourselves we’re not “good

enough" to serve God or serve his church. When we say, "He's forgiven me, but I can't forgive myself" it's not that your sin is too big but that your God is too small. That's the whole point of the story. It's not about our goodness. It's about Jesus. If God can take the filthy clothes of the high priest and turn him into the builder of the temple, what might He want to do with our cruddy clothes? If He has cleansed us, He can call us. Where is He inviting us to step out in faith?

Do you know what Joshua's name is in Hebrew? "*Yeshua*." Do you know what the name "*Yeshua*" translates to in Greek? "*Jesus*" or "*God Saves*." God knew, 520 years before His Son was born that Joshua was a sign of this Branch—and so are you. When you live into your cleanse and your call, when you choose service over shame, you're not being prideful. You're not being foolish. You are a symbol of the Branch. You are pointing to the forgiving, redeeming, healing power of Jesus, because more than anyone else, you know that you don't deserve to be where you are; and yet, here you are! When you choose to believe Jesus died not just for your sin, but for your shame, you don't only find personal freedom. He has cleansed you; He has called you; He has commissioned you to share His Word. You point the world toward the redemption we all crave. God had this plan for Joshua and for you from the beginning. In Jesus Christ, you are cleansed; in Jesus Christ, you are called. ■



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