

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

ALL DRESSED UP

Revelation 7:9-17; Ruth Ann Sandersfeld Funeral; December 7, 2023

When I first came to Fairmont, Ruth Ann and Arlyn were still regulars in church and, even after Arlyn died Ruth Ann continued to attend for as long as her health allowed her. Even while living at memory care, she was a regular at the monthly chapel service I held there for the residents. I liked having her in attendance because she was one of only a few who would sing the hymns. I didn't always have the words printed out, and many residents struggled with being able to read and follow along, but Ruth Ann would sing by heart the well-known hymns and songs I chose.

This shows just how important it is to learn these things of faith when we are young and keep using them throughout our lives as children of God. If we get to the point of failing health and ability, the things of faith stay with us so we can draw on them. This was true of Ruth Ann even at the last chapel service she attended.

Whenever Ruth Ann came to church, or any worship service for that matter, she was "all put together." She was always nicely dressed, her hair done, her makeup on, and nothing out of place. She was of the generation that believes that it is important to dress up for church. When Christians come into God's house, they wear their very best clothes. This was still true of Ruth Ann toward the end of her life at memory care. When I would visit her in her room to give her Communion, she would comment about how she had instructed the staff to make sure she was up and properly dressed in time for the service. I could always count on Ruth Ann being all dressed up for church.

I never got the sense that she "put on airs" over being dressed up, thought she was better than others, or looked down on others not as dressed up as she was. It is important for all of us to remember that being a good Christian is not a matter of how nice our clothes are in church. We are not saved by what we are wearing. We are saved only by the grace of God and through faith in Jesus. God saves us and forgives our sins as a free gift, not because we do anything for God. Yet, how we dress for church can be a reflection of our faith in God. He gave His best for us, so we want to give our best back to Him.

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We were reminded in our Epistle Reading from Revelation seven that the saints in heaven are dressed up as they stand in the presence of God. John tells us: **After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”**

When Christians souls get to heaven after they die, they are dressed in white robes. Maybe you didn't realize that heaven has a dress code, but it does. The white robes the saints wear are made from the finest of material, more costly than any tailor or dressmaker could ever charge. The nicest outfit Ruth Ann ever wore to church would look like rags compared to the white robe she now wears in heaven. Where do these white robes come from? They come from God Himself, who clothes us in them.

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

When Ruth Ann was baptized going on a hundred years ago, it's my guess that she was dressed in a white baptismal gown, maybe one made by her grandmother or mother, which might have been worn by many different children in the family. Some families have baptism gowns that have been passed down from generation to generation. The white gowns worn at baptisms point ahead to what we will wear one day in heaven. What happens to us at our Baptism is a sign of what is to come for Christians in heaven.

Our earthly parents dressed us up for our baptisms, but it is what God clothes us with that saves us. The waters of Baptism clothe us with the righteousness of Jesus. We are cleansed of our sins; our robes have been washed clean and made white in the blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

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It seems contradictory to say that blood washes anything clean and makes it white. Our experience is that blood on white cloth is hard to get out and often leaves a brown stain. Supposedly there is a trick to washing out blood. Are we supposed to use cold water rather than hot? I don't know.

God does not do things the way we think or expect. God's Word says we are stained with sin that is impossible for us to remove. The way God deals with that stain is to use the blood of Jesus, **the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world**. In his First Epistle, St. John – the same apostle who was given the Revelation – wrote: **The blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin** (1:7). Jesus' blood shed on the cross for us and for our salvation removes sin's stain from us in this life and will cloth us with white robes in heaven.

Throughout Ruth Ann's life on this earth God was cleansing her from her sin: at her Baptism; in the Word of absolution she heard in Church or in her apartment; in receiving the Lord's Supper of Jesus' body and blood wherever she was. Ultimately, the clothes that mattered throughout her life were not the ones she carefully chose and put on in preparation for coming before God in His house, but the clothes of God's forgiveness that covered her with Christ's righteousness and washed her clean of all her sin.

I don't know how all of you decided what to wear for Ruth Ann's funeral service. In the end, how well we dress our bodies doesn't really matter in terms of life and salvation in Jesus Christ. That I remembered how Ruth Ann liked to be all dressed up when she came to worship God, whether in church or the activity room where she lived, is really a very minor aspect of the life of faith of this dear Christian woman throughout her long life on this earth.

What does matter is that God dressed Ruth Ann in Christ's righteousness so she can wear now a white robe in heaven. God has brought her out of the troubles and hardships of this life to Himself, and her suffering is over forever. We give thanks for that. What is important is that we remember that heaven has a dress code to get in: **white robes washed in the blood of the Lamb**. The good news is that Jesus has paid for our entire wardrobe. There is no reason for us not to be "all dressed up" now and forever. Amen.