

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Cleaning House”
Luke 3:1-18
December 6, 2015

Last week we kicked off Advent by pulling out all the decorations to prepare our home. And all of us got up and helped do that. And so, I wanted to say, thank you for participating and taking part. It was beautiful to watch you all working together, to prepare this place.

But something happens when you get out all those boxes, open them up and try to start putting things in their place. The more you try to get things ready, the more you realize what a good cleaning things need.

There's a lot that has been hanging around the corners of your house that need to get cleaned up after awhile. Things have a way of getting over looked and building up over time, don't they?

Besides, once you've got all these boxes out, things can be a mess. So, today we're getting ready by cleaning house. In the back are a bunch of mops and dust cloths and buckets and in just a minute, we're going to all get up and start scrubbing things down OK?

No? OK, so this isn't that interactive of a sermon.

We are going to clean house, but not in that way. Instead, we're going to pay a little extra attention to the invitation that John the Baptist gives us each year about this time: **“Get ready,”** he says. **“The status quo is going to do it. It's time to clean up your act.”**

He's out there, trying to prepare the way of the Lord by inviting folks to get baptized. But when they show up to his little washing party, he can tell they aren't really ready. They are there to join in the party, but there's a lot more required than simply showing up for a few holiday treats.

Yes, things are about to change. Yes, the Lord is coming. Yes, God is going to make all the screwed up things in our world right again... ***but be careful. Because chances are some of those screwed up things might just be the things you don't really want changed.***

Chances are, the last time the wheat and the chaff were separated on the threshing floor of your home, some of that chaff when floating to the corners of your house were it's been building up... or its' been gathering behind the couch and under the fridge. Let's be honest, only God knows when the last time you pulled those out and looked what's back there... let alone cleaned it out.

But it's the chaff that the Lord is going to burn away. Which means, if you don't get rid of it now, your whole house just might get caught on fire when the Lord comes.

"So, prepare. Repent!" John says. "Start cleaning house!"

Of course, there are a lot of reasons we don't clean under the fridge or pull out the couch.

It's a hassle.

And it takes a good bit of time, doesn't it?

And, let's be honest, things look pretty good without it. I mean, if we had a big mess out in middle of the room... where everyone can see... well, we're sure to clean that up right away. That stuff is embarrassing. Besides it's the kind of mess we don't want getting tracked around the rest of the house... and it's staring us in the face all the time.

The real tricky part of cleaning house, is paying attention to the stuff that doesn't want to be seen... and that we're really good at hiding.... especially at hiding it from ourselves.

You see, the real work of repentance, isn't just avoiding the flashy sins, or cleaning up the obvious messes. Yes, that has to be attended to. But the ongoing work of repentance is more about "seeing clearly what is true."

That's where repentance begins. It's not a groveling. It's a seeing. An honest look at the way things are for you without inflating it or minimizing it, or shoving it behind the furniture to deal with some other day or season.

One spiritual teacher put it this way,

"Confession is a seeing of things...

as they have been

and are

and can be.

It is an honesty...

with yourself and your Source.

Confession is an unfolding...

an opening,

a turning towards the light."¹

That kind of work doesn't just happen in our every day house cleaning, does it? It's the sort of thing that requires us to stop, and look around, and pay attention to what's there that we've been ignoring for too long now.

By the way, that's what the contemplative life and contemplative practices are really all about. To contemplate something is to pay attention to it, to see it with a different kind of intensity, or intention.

¹ From Burt Burleson's notes.

When there's a frantic pace in our schedules, or a frantic pace in all the thoughts swirling around in our minds and hearts all the time, there's a good chance we're going to miss an awful lot along the way... including the stuff that really needs to be attended to if we're going to **"prepare the way for the Lord."**

The contemplative life is about living in such a way that you can pay attention to what is there... so that it can be unfolded... and opened up, and turned toward the light.

When John is preaching repentance out there in the wilderness, the crowds ask, **"What then should we do?"** Then the tax collectors ask the same question: **"Teacher, what should we do?"** And again the soldiers ask, **"What about us? What should we do?"**

The question is the same for all of them, but the answers are different. There's no one-size-fits-all prescription for repentance. There's no one thing you can "do" to be right with God.

The crowds are different from the tax collectors who are different from the soldiers, who are different from me who is different from you.

The question for us all is the same: **"What, then should we do?"** but the answer is only going to be found if we look at the corners and crevasses of our own "interior castle" to see what's been hiding there.

So, that is the invitation this morning. Maybe start off in the living room, that place within you that welcomes people, where you visit people. It's the room of relationships. And so pull back the couch and take a look. What has been gathering there that needs some attention?

What hurts? What resentments? What distance has grown that needs to be attended to in your relationships? Can you be honest with those things before God? Can you open them up to the light? Will you be honest enough to ask for help?

After you're done there, let's move into the kitchen. Maybe there's a counter where you bills are stacked, because you sit at the table to write your checks. Is there something buried there, in your finances that you need to be honest with God about?

And what about that fridge of yours? Is there more food in there than you could possibly need? Has the fridge become a source of comfort for you, the place you go to fill up the emptiness you feel?

And what leftovers are you still holding on to, way past their expiration date? What can you still not let go of because of the fears that are at work in you?

We could probably spend all morning here, because the chances are if you dig in the back of that fridge, you'll find something you hadn't noticed is still there... after all this time.

And once you're done in the kitchen, maybe it's time to make your way back to your bedroom, that most private of places, the place no one else is allowed to enter... the place you go to when the light fades and the darkness grows heavy. What is back there you're terrified might get seen? What's clutter has been building up under the mattress that needs to be thrown out?

Can you be honest with yourself? Can you be honest about these things with God? I hope you will, because that's where repentance begins. And according to the great tradition, that's what we must do if we want to prepare for an encounter with the Holy One.

It's what John preached in the wilderness, about preparing for the coming of the Lord, and it's what Paul said to the Corinthians about preparing for the table of the Lord. **"Examine yourselves," he said "and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup."** There is some preparation that needs to be done. There is a seeing we need to do. There is a repentance and a forgiveness of the sin that we need to enter.

Let's do that together now... In the silence of the next few moments, be honest before God... and prepare the way of the Lord:

[silence, then prayer]

O God, you know what's hidden in me better than I do.

Truth be told, sometimes just the thought of trying to be that attentive sounds so overwhelming I want to give up before I start.

*And so, we ask for the courage to see what we need to see,
and for the grace to be honest with ourselves and with you.*

As we prepare to come to this table, as we remember not only your birth, but your broken body and your blood poured out for us, Help us to know again today, that it has always been your love poured that holds our lives together...

*Help us to know your healing love again this day.
Meet us at your table, O God,
We ask these things in the name of the One who taught us to pray, saying, "Our Father..."*

Silent Reflection

*Self-righteousness in large part consists in a denial of our lostness. We are as lost as any wandering sheep,
as any dropped coin,
as any prodigal son.*

*For as long as we hold on to any pretense of having it all together
we are prevented from deepening and maturing in the Christian faith."*

~ Eugene Peterson, Tell It Slant.