

Sermon for Advent 2: “John the Baptist: a CLEAN SWEEP!” Rev. John G Smith

A favourite TV show: Clean Sweep! is based on the premise that if you re-organize and clean up your living space, you will change your life. If you are “chosen”, a team of experts is invited into your home, usually when there is an unruly mess of stuff cluttering up the home so much that the family can’t even walk into the room or rooms. The team of experts is called in to offer a clean sweep of the home, and of course, a clean sweep of the family or the individual’s life.

As the person or family undergoes the process of sorting, they are encouraged to either keep, throw or sell every single one of their possessions. They move all the things that they have decided to keep, to one side of the lawn, then tell the client that now they have to reduce the amount to keep to fit on a tarp, say about 10 feet square.

Meanwhile, the team of experts is busy redesigning the living space, repainting, re-organizing, re-fitting the space so that once free of the mountains of clutter, the family will be able to use the space for exactly its purpose. IN other words, they are forced to alter and adjust their over-extended lives, and return to a point where everything they do and are FITS with who they say they are. (Theological sidebar: This is actually the definition of ‘repentance’: turning around and going back to the truth of who you are.)

It can be an ugly process. Some people simply cannot imagine selling treasured items from their past. Others weep and wail because of the sentimental value of a piece of ratty old furniture. The professional organizer is like John the Baptist, coming in from the outside and pointing out all that is “wrong with this picture”, so to speak. The family sometimes almost literally beat him up they are so angry at the things he suggests they need to change.

At a conference for Pentecostal pastors in a poor South African neighbourhood, a young woman describes the problems of her village: the government does not offer any form of support for health care or income, but instead taxes whatever it can from those who are lucky enough to find work. The roaming bands of gangs and insurgents make the neighbourhoods incredibly unsafe, and she worries about her own children growing up to become part of the gangs. She goes faithfully to church every Sunday where the pastor reminds her village each week that they are sinful people and that God will not bless them with prosperity until they stop having babies, stop contracting diseases like Aids, and stop believing in the stories of the elders of the village, in fact, they will remain poor and sick unless they can live a more godly life. (see Brian McLaren, Everything Must Change for the rest of the story)

While the details come from a young woman who lives in a South African township named Kayelitsha, the scenario could be replicated across the world in many different places, even here in Canada.

HOW, we might ask, will humanity EVER get out from under this burden??? How we will ever change the systemic, oppressive narrative that keeps people poor, locked in prisons made by the powerful forces of history, economics and religion? How can WE, part of that trifecta of power, even speak words of hope and blessing, without compromising ourselves, without appearing hypocritical not only to the outside world, but to our own people?

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We could ask: How do you do a CLEAN SWEEP, when the project involves government, church and economy?

You see, the church today, in all its manifestations, is not able to preach the kingdom of God, (it must be silent!!) from within the structures of power : it must be willing to see itself as standing OUTSIDE the kingdom (as it is currently construed), so that it can offer to the world an entirely different NARRATIVE, an entirely different FRAMING STORY, as Brian McLaren terms it, such that our voice can be heard above the din of the world in which we live. Unless our voice is ringing out with the tones of a DIFFERENT alternative WAY, it should not surprise us in the least when people turn us out and off. Our voice is no different from the rest of the world. We are just part of the din.

In short, unless we are willing to be John the Baptist, the voice of one calling in the wilderness, it's not likely we are ever going to manage to provide any kind of meaningful change. That statement should really challenge us. It should really be the subject of some meaningful church meetings here, and at all churches who wonder what has happened to them in this day and age.

Now, I happen to like John the Baptist. IN fact, he strikes me as one of the most original characters in the whole Jesus story, though he has always been marginalized by the Christianization of the gospel narrative. We never find him in the crèche scenes, do you? I've never yet seen a manger scene with John the Baptist anywhere near (he would be a baby too remember). Getting to know John would be like having your lovely daughter go away to school and come home with a boyfriend who is dressed in burlap clothing, who eats bugs for dinner, and who talks loudly and rudely about the problems with the world today, and looks straight at you as he does it. John makes us uncomfortable. He's dirty, he's loud, and he's rude.

But what he has to say about turning around, repenting, returning home, is incredibly `a propos for our time.

In the township of Kayelitsha, after the young woman spoke to the group of pastors, there was an incredible hue and cry from some of them, defending their religion, defending their faith, defending their preaching against sex and abortion and birth control. It's still true that some churches in Africa will not allow their people to use birth control methods, especially the men, because it is seen as a crime against God's will. Never mind that it is not God's will that people should get AIDS and die. As long as the church continues to fight these out-of touch moral battles in places ravaged by intense poverty and under-employment, the people will turn off the message. You might think that we in Canada inhabit the high moral ground. In our own culture, young people look at the churches and other faith groups with a really critical eye. They can see that the world is going to hell in a hand-basket, that the environment is dying, and that the real human and social issues of our times are largely being ignored by the faith groups. Ask any group of young people today to describe religious people: you won't like what you hear. According to a recent study by Gabe Lyons and David Kinnaman, we are tense, judgemental, imbalanced, reactionary, negative, and hypocritical.

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OUCH!

If that assessment is even **half** true, then it occurs to me that we have to change our message, and once we change our message, we have to change our actions. And mean it. Perhaps what is needed is a clean sweep.

John the Baptist did not think that traditional Judaism could or would survive; it had become too wedded to the power of Caesar. IN the years following Julius Caesar’s reign, Rome demanded allegiance to every Caesar, and even appropriated some of the most religious spiritual language for him. Caesar would be known as the “Prince of Peace”, “Son of God”, as the “King of Kings” and “Lord of Lords”. Those words should sound familiar to you; they are from Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus, but, it would never dawn on US to sing those words in homage to our prime minister, regardless of your political stripes. Imagine being a self-respecting rabbi in a strongly Jewish town, having to ascribe glory and honour to Caesar in this way. That would be hard to swallow. But that is what they were forced to do.

My friends, this is what outsiders think of us. That we ARE singing our Hallelujah Chorus to the empires of economics and power, that we are trapped and enmeshed in the systems of domination that rule our world.

And that is why John’s message is so crystal clear and so challenging.

A clean sweep! he is saying. Get out of your comfortable pews and follow me to the desert. Let go of your old hang-ups and come and join me out here, because God is found not in the hallways of the powerful, but in the deserts and wildernesses of our personal lives.

I spent some time in the desert in Arizona a few years ago.

Not only is it a forbidding and unforgiving landscape, but it is not safe. Hot by day and freezing by night, it’s no place to live. Scorpions and black widow spiders put you on edge, even if you never actually see them. Few plants grow.

But ***you can see forever***. And being in such a broad and expansive place, you can feel your heart expand, and your mind expand. You lose your sense of restriction; you lose your orientation to all the things that you thought mattered, but, in the desert, don’t. In the 70’s there was a song about being in the desert with a horse with no name. A very telling line went like this: in the desert, you can’t remember your name, but there ain’t no one for to give you no pain. It was the place to be during a time of great social upheaval.

Now John is not LITERALLY saying to us: go and live in the desert. He invites people to come out to this expansive place, be re-oriented to what matters in life, get your heart and your spirit re-aligned with the REAL purposes of God, then RETURN to your life, and live it with integrity and joy. He invites US to find for ourselves today the place of expansive hope and imagination.

For we are the ones who erect the barriers that stand in the way of our integrity and joy. We are the ones who put up obstacles between us, who craft walls of hatred based on sub-human assumptions of

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differences between us. We are the ones who can't see clearly because we cloud our lives with so much stuff, so much information, so much nonsense, so much untruth, mostly because we don't know any better, and mostly because, that's what the empire wants us to do. Cave. Give in. Acquiesce.

I ask you: in our world, where **do** integrity and joy co-exist???

For 2 billion people, life is about suffering, meagre existence, fear, greed, and violence.

I think that churches will rediscover their integrity and find great joy when they take on **those** issues fully and without reservation.

The gospel of Mark is our text for today. Let me tell you two quick things about it.

One: it's less about Jesus than it is about how his disciples respond to Jesus. The book focuses most on how the disciples react to Jesus (to God) and how they live their lives in reference to him. The message is clear: how will you, dear reader, be different, now that you know what you know? How will YOUR life change, now that you know that God's reign is already here, but you just can't see it or allow yourself to believe it?

And the second thing is this: it is good news.

The very first word “euangelion” means “this is GOOD NEWS”. It's like the headline to a life-changing article in the newspaper. Like those swirling newspapers and magazines you sometimes see in movies, advancing the plot: Good news: God really does have a plan.

Good news: God's not really going to abandon you after all, even though you gave up hoping.

Good news: You are a person of integrity and joy, faith and love. This is your inheritance.

Good news: God is coming to live inside of you, with you, and beside you. Once you understand this: you will see God everywhere, in the face of your neighbour, in the face of the stranger, in the face of the newborn child, in the face of the homeless man on Bayview, in the face of the young woman giving the stinging indictment to the churches of Africa.

Good news: Jesus the Messiah will show you how to live. It's not that hard. And, it will change your life.

Good news: God has already prepared the way for you. God has levelled the mountains of your resistance and your excuses. God has filled in the valleys of your suffering and your pain, and offers to walk with you through it. God has built a highway, beautiful and smooth, brand new pavement. The way is clear, the invitation is at hand. Come and join the revolution out here on this new and dangerous road!