

“Cleaning House”
Advent 3c
Luke 3:7-18

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Grace Lutheran Church
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In Jesus' Name.

They found the Bible. The back-story to all this joy exuding from the prophet Zephaniah is they found the Bible. Oh, not the Bible like we know it. Some parts of it had not yet been written, such as Zephaniah and the entire New Testament. The Bible they found was the core of what is in the first five books of our Bible, what we call the Torah, the law. But it is what they had up to this point. And it was not like my discovery last week. While looking through a seldom-opened cabinet I discovered the old King James Version of the Bible that at one time sat on the lectern here at Grace. No, it's not like they had multiple copies or newer and older versions. What they found was the one copy they had.

They had forgotten about it over the generations. At the start everyone knew what was in it, or thought they knew. They referred to it less and less. Someone put it on a high shelf in a corner cabinet for safekeeping. After a generation or two no one remembered it existed. And then after a few more generations they discovered it when they were renovating the building. It happened under the watch of King Josiah. He was the great grandson several times removed of King Solomon, who presided over the construction of the temple. The building had fallen into disrepair. Dry rot weakened the great cedars of Lebanon used in construction. Grime covered the gold overlay. The accumulation of long years was stacked in corners and shoved into side rooms. No one even wanted to look into the basement.

Josiah ordered a house cleaning and a renovation. It was during this time they found the Scripture. Josiah read it and then ordered it to be read in the hearing of the people. After reading it Josiah undertook a real house cleaning. When they read, “#1, 'You shall have no other gods you,’” the Tarot-card-reading operation under the north balcony had to go. The small group studying astrological signs and casting horoscopes was evicted. The shop selling crystals was closed down and its inventory used in the cement for the temple renovations. The priests all got furloughed and had to go back to seminary. Josiah's house cleaning extended out to the courthouses and the houses of commerce, so they also would operate by God's demands for justice. Zephaniah's joy is the result of the housecleaning going on in the temple and society.

In former days, before being shoved in a high cabinet in a side room, this third Sunday of Advent was called Gaudete Sunday, Rejoice Sunday. It comes as a welcome relief, insinuating itself into the looming judgment of Advent.

The house cleaning continues today with John the Baptist, but I don't hear any joyful sounds coming from him. I heard a radio report about the newsreaders in North Korea. They have three tones of voice. One is lofty and warbling for praising Dear Leader. A second is rather flat for reading ordinary news. The third is harsh, loud, and scolding. It is used to excoriate the US and our lackeys. John adopted that third tone. He goes after the very people who came out to him. You snakes," he scolds them, "who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? If you think you can count on being Abraham's descendant to save you, you are wrong. God can raise up these dumb stones to be children of Abraham. You are unfruitful trees. The axe that will take care of you is being sharpened right now."

John calls for some personal house cleaning. At Grace we do not have a water cooler for people to stand around. We tend to gather at the printer, waiting and hoping for what we sent it to print. It is an Advent experience, waiting and hoping. While we wait and hope we talk. One person advised me, "The Bible texts we have in Advent do not warrant long sermons. They are easy to understand. All you need to say is 'Behave yourselves and write bigger checks.'" Only John said it with more volume.

John, however, was also meddling in King Herod's affairs, cleaning Herod's house. The soldiers and tax collectors who traveled out to hear John and be baptized by him were Herod's employees. John is going to send Herod's soldiers and tax collectors back to him as honest men. What's a tyrant to do? We know what he did with John.

Where's the joy. Our text says, "With many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to them." None of this sounded like good news. We Lutherans are strict about what Paul calls "rightly dividing the Word of God." One of our Lutheran forebears, C.F.W. Walther, called it the "proper distinction between law and gospel," or judgment and promise. Is it possible that judgment can be good news, an occasion for joy, a gaudete event when backing-up the word of judgment is the promise of forgiveness? John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. The good news he proclaimed was of the mightier one coming into the world.

Forgiveness is what the mightier one brings. Jesus comes to be Lord of our lives. Gaudete rejoice.

The power he exercises over us cannot be the same kind of power we are accustomed to only more of it. The proper use of such power is to restrain evil and promote the common good. The nature of such power is force exercised upon us. A pastor named Brian McLaren, in his book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, writes about the various lords who exercise dominion over our lives.¹ Our genetic make-up controls us. The Marxists say our lives are determined by class struggle. Freud said it is primitive psychosexual aggression. Our competitive nature determines our behavior and the way the world operates say the social Darwinists. Everyone knows what controls us is our consumer instincts. The advertisers tell us we need such and such in order to stand out from the crowd. Everyone goes out and buys it because we are all our own person and march to a different drummer. It makes no sense but it seems to work.

However we spell it out, the nature of such power is force exercised upon us. That is true when such power is used by bad rulers like Herod, but it is true even when used by good rulers and good parents. Such power restricts us or gives us permission. The ultimate ability of such power is to take life. It cannot give it. This power is bordered on all sides by the grave. It does not have the authority to cross that border.

To be good news and a gaudete event the power that Jesus exercises must be power of a whole different nature. According to McLaren, “Jesus is the one who delivered us not only from corrupt power, but also from the whole approach to power that is so corruptible.” He did it by dying on a cross and rising from the grave. Let’s call that kingdom power. In the model of power to which we are accustomed the one who comes back from the dead gets even with his foes. That is not the kind of power Jesus exercised. We witness his kingdom power at work with Saul, the persecutor of the church. Jesus transformed him to be his chief apostle and witness. The ones who crucified Jesus were among those to whom the apostles proclaimed the good news. Their aim was to bring them to faith and into the community of faith.

Those who heard John’s exhortations asked “What then shall we do?” It is the same question asked beginning in Acts chapter 2 by those who heard the apostles’ preaching. Peter told them, “Repent, (which is another way of saying “Undertake a thorough house cleaning”) and be

¹ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Zondervan, 2004, pp. 80-82, as quoted in *Pulpit Resource*, vol. 37, no. 4, Year B & C, October, November, December 2009, p. 48.

baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” John told them practical details of what their house cleaning entailed. “Whoever has two coats must give one to the person with none. Whoever has food must do the same thing.” To the tax collectors he said, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” They had a bad habit of shaking down customers for much more than what was owed. John instructed the soldiers, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” Later in Luke’s gospel we encounter soldiers. Some come to him in faith. Others come to take him to trial. We meet up with one particular tax collector named Zacchaeus. When confronted by God’s overwhelming hospitality in Jesus he vowed to give fourfold repayment to all he had defrauded. See, in a way it does come down to “Behave yourselves and write bigger checks.”

What then shall we do to clean house? For one it means we toss out all those other text, those other narratives that would define our lives. We toss those aside and rediscover the scripture narrative of God’s salvation history into which we are baptized. Cleaning house means cleaning out all other lords. McLaren writes, “In Jesus’ day, ‘Caesar is Lord’ was the political pledge of allegiance.... To call Jesus ‘Lord’ meant that there is a power in Jesus more important than the power of the king of the greatest state in history. To say ‘Jesus is Lord’ was then (and should be now!) a profoundly political statement – affirming the authority of a ‘powerless’ Jewish rabbi with scarred feet over the power of Caesar himself with all his swords, spears, chariots, and crosses.”²

We clean house of all inappropriate coercive power. I think this is what Paul was after in his letter to the church in Ephesus. He told them that in matters of husband and wives, parents and children, even employers and employees we are to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. In that case we are always thinking of what is best for the other person. And if we are all doing that at the same time, well then, gaudete, rejoice.

² Ibid.