

Second Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2021
 “Dust Bunnies Under the Bed” (Luke 3:1-6)

I remember one Christmas as a young boy when our pastor visited every home in our congregation. During the week before Christmas – when everyone was home from work and school – he appeared at everyone’s front door. We knew he was coming, of course, because he had mailed out a schedule outlining where he would be at what time. There was a visit scheduled every 30 minutes each day of that week. I can remember the conversations that took place among friends and relatives in the days leading up to the visit. *The pastor is coming to our house at 11:30 on Tuesday. I wonder if he'll be expecting lunch. When is your visit scheduled? With a degree of nervousness and anxiety, our congregational families began to prepare for his arrival. How will we entertain him? What will we talk about? Is there a specific reason for his coming? What does he want?*

You see, pastors were extremely important people back then, and a visit by him was a big deal – especially if no one was sick or had died. Everything had to be perfect! I couldn’t really figure out what all the fuss was about. He was only going to be there 20 minutes or so, but Mom wanted to make sure that everything was ready for his visit. She solicited the whole family, and together we scrubbed the floors, washed the windows, vacuumed the window sills, cleaned the carport, and so on. We cleaned every square inch of the house. I even got the dust bunnies from under the bed – like he would be looking under there!

I found things down in our sofa that had been there for a while and even took a scrub brush to the shower –although I knew he had no intention of taking a shower during his short visit. *He may look behind the shower door. You don't know what people do when they close the bathroom door – even preachers.* It seemed like a good argument at the time, but from my perspective today, Mom was probably just using his visit as motivation to get done the things she wanted.

My mom was a lot like John the Baptist, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: *Repent. Get the house in shape*, a paraphrase of Isaiah: *Prepare the way. Make his paths straight*. So for two days before the pastor’s visit, we filled every valley, made the crooked straight, and the rough ways smooth. We were ready for Pastor Stiver.

As it turned out, it was a delightful visit. He was very charming and put us well at ease. He came simply to wish us a Merry Christmas. There had been no reason for the anxiety. We had prepared the house for a Health Department Inspector, but the one who was coming was coming just to let us know he loved and cared for us – regardless of what was beneath the sofa cushions on which he sat.

This helps me see the irony of John the Baptist’s appearance a few weeks before Christmas every year. John comes shouting, *Repent! Shape up! Get your house in order because the Messiah is coming*. But the irony is that the Messiah is coming to save us precisely because we *can't* get our house shaped up and our lives in order. If we could shape up ourselves and straighten out our lives, why would we need a Savior? I am more thankful than I can say that this Jesus comes to your house and mine even when there are dust bunnies under the bed and mildew in the shower. He comes regardless.

Now, I'm not saying that we don't need to hear or respond to John's word. I'm glad we got our house into shape, even though Pastor Stiver would have smiled at us if it had been absolutely filthy. But the fact is this: even though my mother is a fastidious housekeeper, if it had not been for the pastor's coming, the dust bunnies would have collected under my bed for a while longer and we would not have fished out the things under the sofa cushion.

So, I'm glad for John's words: *Repent. Get your spiritual house in order. Straighten out your life*, because there is a lot crooked that you and I ought to straighten, and a lot rough that needs to be made smooth: the gossip we repeat, the discouraging words we speak to one another, the abuse we heap on those we love, our inattention to the poor and the lonely, our captivity to our culture and its values

John is right. We all desperately need to turn our lives around and make them conform to the will of God. There is no arguing with John on that point. If we don't confess the dirt of our house and every day repent of it and work to get our spiritual house in order, then the mildew grows and the dust bunnies multiply. And before long, the trash down in the sofa of our soul makes it impossible for the divine guest to even sit down in our house, much less save us from our filth. So we need to listen to John.

But if Christmas is only about John and his words, then it won't be a very merry Christmas around your house or mine because we can *never* get our houses spic and span enough for the holy Son of God. If Jesus is coming to inspect your house and mine with a white glove, then there will literally be hell to pay because we can start anew every day and repent till the cows come home, and never do enough shaping up to be worthy of his coming. There will always be one more dust bunny bounding around under the bed of our pretenses, and one more layer of something growing behind the shower curtain of our virtues. This is the dark side of John's message. As much as we'd like to repent of our ways, we can never do enough to make ourselves spiffy enough.

So, are we condemned? John says *no*, for a new thing has come to pass. In Bethlehem, a new order began. Yes, God still commands us to be perfect and we still need to repent of our sins, but when we have done what we can – when we cleaned our house as clean as we can and tried as best we can to discern God's will – God gives us his gift, his gift of Christmas: a cross to wear on our foreheads. Because we've been washed in the waters of baptism and marked with the sign of the cross, what God sees when he looks at us is not the stains on the carpet of our character, but his Son's cross on our heads and our hearts.

Christ is what you and I should be, but never can be. Yet, God declares us perfect for his sake. Yes, the house is still a mess, but we are *in Christ* and bear the mark of Christ forever. Therefore, Christ comes this Christmas – and everyday – to put us at ease and give us his peace. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.