

Advent 2A  
St. Matthew 3:1-12  
December 4, 2016  
St. George's Bolton  
Fr. Chris

## The House-Cleaning Season

*Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees, every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*

What do you do to get ready for guests for the holidays? Yes, you go shopping, but you also get out the vacuum cleaner. Right?

I don't know about you, but I have been busy cleaning house to prepare for the season. Before I put those decorations up, the dust must come down. It's part of the preparation for the season. We want everything to be just right.

As I began to get ready for the holiday in my own home over the last two weeks, I was surprised to find the dust webs and dust bunnies that were hiding all over my condo, and I thought I had kept it pretty clean!

I remember when I was a little boy, my mother would clean the house every week. But twice a year, she did what she called "house-cleaning" where everything was taken out of the cabinets and they were scrubbed from top to bottom and the contents were cleaned or discarded if they were food items that were too old. She even unhung curtains and had them cleaned at the cleaners and she removed the Venetian blinds and washed those in the tub to get the grime off of them. It

took her several weeks to clean the house from top to bottom like this. One of the “house-cleanings” took place just before the holidays.

In fact, *preparing* is a big thing that we do to get ready for things in our lives, whether preparing to take a trip or getting ready for a weather disaster like a hurricane or a blizzard. However, house cleaning is not a part of those urgent preparations. But it is when you are talking about “downsizing” for retirement. Then we revisit all of the possessions we have collected and the things we have saved and cull what we suppose we do not need or want in the future. This is often a very freeing exercise. That is because we end up being controlled by the amount of possessions we have acquired, so much so, that we run out of space to put things. This is especially revealing when you live in a small one-bedroom condo as I do. If something comes in the door, it is highly likely that something else must leave. If I collect too much stuff, it is possible that “*thing to leave*” might be *me*.

In our spiritual lives we collect lots of junk. Sometimes that junk is comprised of stuff we feel guilty about. This may even require a serious “scrubbing,” we imagine, to get ourselves “clean.” Advent is the season to do that spiritual house-cleaning. We may want to adorn our lives with some spiritual decorations. This might include starting each day with a little quiet time so we can soak in some of the peace of the season. It is also an opportunity to decorate your life by reading one of those small books of daily meditations like *Forward Day By Day* or Barbara Crafton’s lovely Advent meditations in, “*Let EVERY Heart Prepare*.” Sometimes the junk we need to off-load are the possessions we have collected and need to dispatch. This can also be very spiritually freeing.

When I hear the line about the “axe being laid to the root of the tree” in today’s Gospel passage, the image called forth is of working in the yard to remove an unwanted tree or shrub, which has lived beyond its usefulness and now poses a danger to your house or sidewalk. I am reminded of the stump-grinders which you can get after you remove a dead tree in your yard. One such event here at St. George’s was the row of shrubs growing over our sidewalk to the parish house. The Boy Scouts had an Eagle project to remove them, and it was *a very difficult task*. Not only do you cut down the shrub or tree, but also you want to remove the roots which take up space in your garden, or might possibly lead to the tree or shrub regrowing in the same space, or preventing you from planting grass or a new tree or shrub or garden where the old one once grew. Laying the axe to the root is a way of eradicating a shrub or vine you do not want. The Boy Scouts used this and the power of a pick up truck to pull out our old shrubs. In a vineyard, you would not want to save a non-producing vine, but would replace it quickly, if you want to have enough produce the next year.

How does this apply to our spiritual life? Well, when you want to change something here, the axe must be laid to the root of the problem. *Real change* means you have to “root-out” the problem so it does not return, like pulling up a weed by its roots. If you leave the roots behind in the soil and pull only the portion of the weed that you *can see*, it will quickly grow back before you know it.

What does this look like? If you want to change the way you eat, it is a lifestyle change, never a diet. You need to root out all those snacks hidden away in the kitchen or other places. You need to root out the bad and unhealthy food in your daily diet. More importantly, to be successful you have to get to

the root of the problem, that is, why you reach for food when you feel poorly, or every time you get anxious or depressed. Getting to the root and changing it out, pulling it up from the ground of your life, refreshes the spiritual soil and allows you to move on. It allows a new planting to take root.

The same is true of quitting smoking or any other habit you want to change. Get to the root, and pull that root out before it chokes the life out of you and ruins your life and your health, both spiritually and physically. Using an axe metaphorically demonstrates the radical need to get to the bottom, the root of your spiritual issues or problems that are plaguing you.

So we return to that house-cleaning work which is a staple of the season. Sometimes when you are doing a more thorough cleaning, and you move out a chair to clean underneath it, you discover that long lost treasure you were searching for, but you could not find after a very long effort! It feels so very good when you make such a discovery. Perhaps it was a lost earring that you really loved. Maybe it was a letter from an old friend that you searched for and thought was lost. Whatever the discovery, it delivers a sense of joy, relief, and peace of mind.

The same may happen to you when you do your spiritual house-cleaning. You move that old chair that you spiritually found comfortable leaving in its place. Once moved, you make a discovery about yourself, finding something out about yourself that you thought was long gone and lost. Such searches are very revealing.

I remember when I was showing off the beautiful and expensive cloth of gold vestments at my former parish church to an old friend of mine from college, imagining they would be

impressed. Instead, I had my chair moved. The response was the opposite from the one I expected, calling me to account for my being so absorbed by church finery and being awed by the baubles. They pointed out to me, that there was a big disconnect between me at the time, from my social concern for the poor and disdain for such finery, back when I was in college. Needless to say, this episode made me think about it, and more than that, lay an axe to the root of my tree and change what I had become.

So the second thing I give you to ponder this Advent Season, after the *Season of Generosity* last week, is to set about cleaning your house: *your spiritual house*. Spend at least some of the time cleaning the home in which you live and which endures to the next life. Decorate it for the season with joy and good things, which will bring peace to your mind and to your heart. Most of all, lay an axe to those things which must go, and toss them in the dumpster or the fire place! This is one of the finest ways to prepare for Christmass I know. AMEN