

## ***“Spring Cleaning: Past”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Lent, Sunday, February 22, 2015  
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

*Holy Scriptures: Mark 1: 9-15 1 Peter 3: 18-22*

### Mark 1:9-15 (NRSV)

<sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

<sup>12</sup>And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup>He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

### 1 Peter 3:18-22 (NRSV)

<sup>18</sup>For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup>in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup>who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. <sup>21</sup>And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup>who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Sermon

## **Stronger Than Dirt**

When I was a kid a neighbor passed on to us a cat with no tail and no manners.

The Calvert family has a long history of tending pets and strays and adopting wildlife.

However, this cat in particular strained our capacity for love of God's creation.

My brothers named the cat Ajax because Ajax the Cat was "Stronger Than Dirt."

No amount of soap, perfume, or beauty cleansers eased its all-powerful aroma.

And we can testify to this day that no training sank in.

Clearly Ajax believed that the word housebroken

was meant to be taken literally, as in "*What in this house can I break next?*"

Ajax proved to be stronger than dirt.

We like to be clean.

We invest great amounts of money and time and resources to look nice, to smell nice, to be appealing and pleasing to one another.

We may even apologize if we break into a sweat.

I was a witness of two women college classmates who actually argued

over whether one of them was sweating while studying for a tough exam.

One said to the other, "I don't sweat; I glow."

As much as we scrub, swipe and swab on the outside,

what we crave is to be clean from the inside out.

We seek and pray for God and the whole people of God

to help us attain that most precious of gifts:  
to be healed and washed, purified and  
sanctified,  
to be renewed and forgiven from the  
inside out.

We pray Psalm 51: 10 with all our might:

*“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right  
spirit within me.”*

Ajax may be stronger than dirt;

the Good News is that nothing is stronger than the  
cleansing power of God.

Throughout the liturgical Season of Lent

let us explore together and then tap into the cleansing  
power of God

We start by examining ways to practice spring cleaning of  
our past, from the inside out.

**Take home today these three insights:**

- 1. We can find a way to forgive what has happened in the past.**
- 2. We can overcome and learn from our past.**
- 3. We are not defined by our past.**

**First, we can find a way to forgive what has happened in the past.**

Some folks are blessed with short memories.

They've learned the discipline to move on from painful past experiences.

Football coaches tell cornerbacks who get burned on a deep ball to have a short memory.

Coaches say, “Shake it off and get ready for the next play, the next pass.”

This week baseball pitchers and catchers reported for spring

training,

and a common piece of advice for relief pitchers is to have a short memory.

Coaches say, "As sure as dawn follows the night, you will get shelled in a game,

and you'll saddled with the loss; learn from it, shake it off, forget it,

and get ready for the next ballgame."

Shake it off.

Singer songwriter Taylor Swift has made a career from transforming past pains

into one chart-topping record after another.

*My ex-man brought his new girlfriend*

*She's like "Oh, my god!" but I'm just gonna shake.*

*And to the fella over there with the hella good hair*

*Won't you come on over, baby? We can shake, shake, shake*

Shake it off.

Let it go.

Move on.

Don't look back.

Don't hold grudges.

Okay, let's be real, my friends.

You and I know that this is so much easier said than done.

We have long memories.

No wonder forgiveness does not come easily.

We are so busy looking backward into our past

we lose track, ignore, miss what God is saying to us today, in the present.

And often we nurse grudges, bitterness and resentments.

We nurse our past hurts and harms and hates,

tending them, feeding them, giving them a special place in our hearts and minds,

letting them keep us from sleep and slumber

and distracting us from what is going on

in the here and now.  
Where there is no forgiveness there is no life.

When you have a painful past that needs to be dealt with,  
the gift of forgiveness is given to yourself as much as  
to anyone else.

Anthony De Mello said, *“An unwillingness to forgive others  
for the real or imaginary wrongs they have done is a poison  
that affects our health  
– physical, emotional and spiritual – sometimes very  
deeply.*

*You commonly hear people say, ‘I can forgive, but I cannot  
forget!’*

*or ‘I want to forgive but cannot.’*

*What they really mean is they do not want to forgive.”*

Forgiveness, which is stronger than dirt, cleanses the  
forgiver as well as the forgiven.

A grocery store owner passed away quite unexpectedly.

Many costumers had purchased food on credit.

After he died they refused to pay off their debts to his widow  
and children.

The family tried in vain to get reimbursed.

Finally one evening the mother called her children into their  
backyard.

She placed the outstanding bills in a pile on the barbecue  
grill and set them on fire.

Even though the family needed the funds the bills  
represented,

she understood that the family needed their peace of  
mind even more.

Jesus said, *“When you forgive the sins of any they are*

*forgiven.”*

We have that blessed gift, that blessed power, that blessed love to forgive and move on.

What bills, what baggage, what burdens  
do you need to place at the base of the cross,  
and then walk away, leaving them behind for  
Jesus?

**First, we can find a way to forgive what has happened in the past.**

**Secondly, we can overcome and learn from our past.**

In June of 2012, our congregation gathered in this sacred place

to remember and celebrate the life and love of Mr. Lonnie Sapp.

You may have known Lonnie or known of him or know someone who did.

There are many favorite stories of Lonnie.

They usually revolve around food.

Some take place in kitchens with steam and aromas and laughter filling the air.

Some take place in fellowship halls

where folks gather to laugh and live into their call,  
and there is Lonnie in the midst,

having prepared his dish

and happily watching us plow  
into it with gusto.

Some happened in places far from here,

maybe in the United States Army or in Florida

or out west in Colorado or due northeast in  
Queens, New York,

or farther on south along the Gulf Coast

or one of three recent church mission trips

to rebuild homes damaged by Hurricane

Katrina.

Imagine 20 men and women sleeping on skinny cots in one large room,

snoring in unison, a cacophony of sound,  
being awakened at four o'clock in the morning  
by the delicious smell of bacon and fresh  
coffee.

What happened?

Turns out that Lonnie thought it was 6 AM  
so there he was, happily, sleepily up making us  
breakfast.

Best 4 AM meal ever.

Jay Norton said, *"Lonnie, thanks for the great breakfast,  
but we are going to tie you to your cot if you do it again!"*

Still more legacies abound, like the overflowing of God's love.

Lonnie gave to us the gift of forgiveness and grace.

Lonnie had every right to be bitter, to live cynically, to harbor grudges.

He was born and raised in a place and time when racism was both the norm and law.

He grew up in Oviedo, Florida where he attended the Colored Elementary School.

His ticket out was to take his barely 100-pound frame  
and join the US Army in 1948.

His lifelong career in the Army was as a cook,  
and he was proud of his labor and his title,  
for it was the Lord's work and not done in  
vain.

He encountered a few racist officers and some hard times,  
but he refused to allow other people's prejudice to  
define him.

Lonnie knew that he was defined by a gracious God  
who loved him and made him beautiful.

He could have become bitter, yet he remained sweet like

Jesus.

Don't misinterpret or misunderstand the term "sweet like Jesus".

Jesus of Nazareth had a backbone, a spine,  
a deep and abiding will to be courageous and strong  
for justice.

Yet when he encountered evil he did not cave in to hatred;  
he lived love unconditionally and graciously.

We have found it easy to follow in his footsteps, for he  
showed us the way.

Are we speaking of Jesus or Lonnie?

Hard to tell, isn't it?

What an amazing man...

What an amazing Messiah...

**First, we can find a way to forgive what has  
happened in the past.**

**Further, we can overcome and learn from our past.**

**Finally, we are not defined by our past.**

Every example before you is there for the plucking,  
if you will but take the time and make the energy to  
learn from it.

Great scene in The Lion King when Simba is sulking, saying  
he can't learn from the past.

Rafiki the shaman whacks Simba on the head with a stick.

*"Ouch, why did you do that?"*

*"What does it matter,"* says Rafiki, *"it is in the past."*

Then he swings the stick again; this time Simba ducks.

*"See,"* said Rafiki, *"you can learn!"*

Clearly not only can we learn from the past, God also learns  
from our mistakes.

God is constantly changing things up to get our attention:



God changes tactics, methods, people, even conditions  
to help us grow and evolve.  
The Spirit helps us learn from our past and other's past, from  
examples around us.

Sometimes we get overly concerned with our pasts,  
with what we did or did not do,  
with what someone else did or did not do to us.  
Believe you me, from what I have read in the Bible, God is  
not obsessed with your past.  
God is calling to you to live and serve in the present.

Look at the Holy Bible.

The Holy Bible is a book, a good book that consists of one  
testimonial after another

of people just like you and me.

The testimonials in the Psalms, the Proverbs,  
the Story of Israel and the Gospels and Epistles  
tell of the followers of the ways of God.

These friends and followers of God,  
even though they had checkered pasts,  
went on to faithfully serve the Lord.

Yet consider what God had to work with,  
the personal pasts that God encountered and forgave:

Adam passed the buck; Noah was a drunk; Sarah was too  
old;

Abraham was even older; Isaac was a daydreamer; Jacob was  
a cheater; Joseph was abused, misused, and used; Moses was  
a stutterer;

Samson was a womanizer; Rahab was a prostitute; Gideon,  
Jeremiah and Timothy were all too young; David had an  
affair and was a murderer; Jonah ran from God, twice; Peter  
denied Christ, thrice; Matthew was a tax collector;  
Martha was a worrier;

Zacchaeus was too small; Nicodemus was too literal;  
11 disciples slept when Jesus needed them the most; Paul  
persecuted Christians...for a living; and Lazarus was dead!  
This reminds us of the book,  
Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent  
Excuses!

No more excuses!

Many people think that we have to straighten out our lives  
first,

and then maybe God will consider us, cleanse us, call  
us, commission us to serve.

In fact, according to the teachings and examples in the Bible,  
it's the opposite.

Regardless of whatever road you have trod,

regardless of what you have done or said,

come to Jesus just as you are, a beloved Child  
of God,

and trust that

*the Trinity of the Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit  
is stronger than dirt. Amen!*

## EXTRA MATERIAL:

### Call to Confession

The Baptism of Jesus Christ was immediately followed  
by his journey into a hostile environment. His story mirrors  
our common story: promises and commitments made in  
glory, in public, in worship, in the context of supportive  
friends and family will be tested when we are apart, alone,  
away in hostile environments. We don't have to go to the  
Sahara to know what it is like to walk in the desert. Just as a  
quiet stream can become a flash flood in the blink of an eye,  
when the going gets rough even good friendships get testy

and tested, credit and debit concerns predominate world views, misunderstanding escalates to mistrust, confusion reigns over what to say yes and no to.

Jesus overcame evil by being very clear about his commitment to God. God is first and foremost -- everything else flows from that singular priority. Since God's will is for the positive uplifting, reconciliation and renewal of all of creation, than anything that seeks to distract or detour you away from this source of goodness can and must be set aside as a temptation. Let us now enter into our communal time of silent confession; may it become a sacred experience of grace.

### Assurance of Forgiveness

Jesus resisted the wiles of the Tempter not once, not twice but three times, and if he could do it, so can we...and so we shall, thanks to the grace of God.

### Call to Communion

When we read in the Gospels about Jesus being led by the power of the Spirit to go into the desert to meet the Tempter, and to face whatever tests were placed before him, we're overhearing Jesus' own experiential faith. In effect he said to his disciples then and today, "Here is my story, my testimony; take from it what you can and will so you will be strong and prepared for when the Tempter approaches you." The writer of First Peter was similarly moved, expressing his faith in this way: "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit." Be strong. Be prepared. Here at the Lord's Table be filled and made alive in the spirit.

### Benediction

When Jesus Christ left the desert he was once again

led by the power of the Holy Spirit, even though he was not the same exact person who had been led by the spirit into a time and place of testing. Maybe he had a touch of gray. Maybe a few wrinkles. Maybe a few scars, whether visible or hidden, were there just the same. However Jesus had a story worth repeating. Jesus resisted the wiles of the Evil One not once, not twice but three times, and if he could do it, so can we...and so we shall, thanks to the grace of God. Go forth, led by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen!