

Cleaning up the Mess

Luke 1:67-79

It's been an challenging Fall for my two kids.

Brigitta, as you've heard me tell, is overseas, Andres is a junior in college.

But when I say challenging, I don't actually mean being overseas, or being a junior in college.

What I'm actually talking about is that this Fall each of them is living in an apartment, not in a dorm room, for the first time...

Brigitta in Abu Dhabi - Andres in Maryland.

Now, I have liked to think of myself as a good parent.

I have liked to believe that David and I raised these two to be fully functional, independent, human beings.

I have enjoyed living with that illusion.

But this has been the semester in which I've come face to face with the reality that in fact ... **no**.

No, I blew it somehow.

Because placed into apartments of their own,

my kids -- who are lovely human beings, truly --

my kids have revealed themselves to be woefully unprepared for independent living.

As evidence, I present to you just *some* of the questions that I have received from them over the past three months:

"How do you **cook** an egg? Do you just, like, dump it in the saucepan?"

"How often are you supposed to vacuum? Like, every month, or is that too much?"

"I bought the chicken breast like you told me. Now what?"

"Why is there black fuzzy stuff in my bathroom? How do you make it go away?"

"I have spaghetti, salsa, and hot dogs. Will that be good mixed together?"

(Answer, by the way? -- apparently it kind of was.)

Now, I haven't seen Brigitta's apartment, since it is seven thousand miles from here.

But I **have** had occasion to visit Andres' apartment a couple times this Fall.

There are four guys living together in it.

And really, that's all that needs to be said

In October, I went down with a borrowed carpet cleaner in the back seat.

I sensed, somehow, it might be needed.

As we ran the steam cleaner over the carpet, Andres' roommate watched in amazement. "Look," he said, "you can almost see what color it used to be."

I was down there again two days ago.

On the way, I called Andres and asked if there was anything he'd like me to pick up for the apartment.

"Yeah," he said, "we definitely need toilet paper."

Toilet paper, I said.

"Actually," he said, "we're also out of paper napkins ... and paper towels ... and the tissues are gone, too."

I didn't want to think too much about any of that,

I just filled the back seat with all of the above;

I also threw in cleaning wipes, and lots of air freshener.

And as I walked into the apartment with the Lysol and the Febreze, and the toilet paper,

a kind of crazy thought crossed my mind,

the kind of crazy thought that ministers have sometimes.

I thought: I bet this is why God sent Jesus.

I thought: this is what Christmas is all about.

All right, work with me here, and don't get too hung up on the toilet paper part.

What had suddenly occurred to me was this.

What if what we are *are the kids*

trying to live on our own,

trying to figure out on our own how to manage ...

and not doing that great a job with it, really.

And what if God is the parent on the phone saying
"okay, listen, this is how you make scrambled eggs,"
and "seriously, mold on the ceiling?"

And then saying, "you know what, I'm just going to stop by with a steam cleaner
and see what I can do."

I think that **is** , actually , what Christmas is.

I think that's what the birth of a Messiah is,
what incarnation IS.

It's God turning up in the middle of the mess to **fix** the mess.

It's God showing up with cleaning supplies.

It's God saying "okay, maybe doing this all by yourself really WAS too much to
ask,

let me come see what I can do to help."

God as the parent who comes in to fix the mess.

God as, yes, helicopter parent in the best sense of the word.

God showing up to straighten things out.

The incarnation, God in human form
the Messiah,

everything we rejoice in now:

this **is** what it is.

The passage that Betsy read to you says that.

Not in the exact same words, but it says that.

It's a beautiful passage from the very first chapter of Luke's Gospel.

The **second** chapter of Luke, the next chapter, is all the Christmasy stuff we
know:

angels and shepherds, stars and mangers.

But the first chapter is the back story,

the anticipation, the promise of what is about to happen.

And in the passage she read to you,
Zechariah, whose kid was going to be John the Baptist,
Zechariah has this beautiful speech,
spoken to his newborn son John.
He says, son, you are going to be something special.
You are going to get people's hearts ready for someone special.
And that someone is going to be God's own Messiah.
And then he says this, he says:
When that Messiah comes, son,
he will be the one to help us out of our messes.

Only he says it better:
"By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Someone is coming, Zechariah was saying,
to help us out.
Someone to give us light, and guide us.
Guide us into the way of peace.
Guide us out of our mess.

And that was Jesus.
Baby in the manger, God with us, Emmanuel.
That was Jesus:
God turning up in the middle of the mess to fix the mess.

So, what messes do we possibly need help with?
Aren't we doing pretty well on our own down here?

Yeah.
Right.

Not so much.

I am the mother of a young woman teaching in Abu Dhabi,
and a young man who is a person of color --
so terrorism abroad and injustice here
struck pretty close to home for me this week.

We're **not** doing so well on our own.

We definitely need God with us, Emmanuel.

We've got a ton of questions we need help with:

like, how do we live together as children of God.

And we've created a lot of mess in this place we live;

we've got a lot of junk to get rid of:

like intolerance, which is simply the inability to see the holy in another --

and fanaticism, mistaking humanity's worst impulses for God's will,

and ignorance, closing ourselves off from what God puts in front of us to learn.

We need a mom. We need a parent, we need God-with-us.

We need someone to teach us again the meaning of compassion
in its truest sense:

feeling what another feels:

knowing that no one's pain is separate from your own.

We need the one whom Zechariah promised:

the one who guides our feet into the way of peace.

That's why, standing there in the door of Andres' apartment with cleaning
supplies,

that's why I had that crazy thought.

This is the Christmas story: this is why God sent Jesus.

To help us fix the messes in this world.

And that's true.

That's why God decided that it was time to just get God's self down here,
because there's some big stuff we need a lot of help with.

Peace. Justice. Hunger ... and Hope.

But the truth also is, of course, that each one of **us** needs help, too.

Each one of us at some point is the kid standing there alone in an apartment and picking up the phone to say "how does this work?"

Each one of us is the kid who desperately needs someone to come through the door to put things right again, to clean up the mess.

Anne Lamott is one of my favorite writers.

She is a faithful Christian and a wildly funny person; her new book will be our next Book Chat selection, in fact.

But there was a time in her life which was *not* wildly funny, or faith-filled. It was a mess.

And at one of the messiest points, on a night when she was drunk and miserable and filled with self-loathing, someone showed up to help.

Here's how she writes it:

*"After a while, as I lay there,
I became aware of someone with me,
hunkered down in the corner.*

The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there.

There wasn't.

But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus.

I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my room, watching me with patience and love,

and I squinched my eyes shut,

but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with.

....And I took a long deep breath and said out loud

"All right. You can come in."

And that, that, was the beginning of a new life.

Not perfect, she would be the first to say, but no longer alone.

For this, too, Jesus was sent.

Yes, to teach us about justice and compassion,
about hope and faith.

Yes, to help us change our world in a big and needed and just ways.

But for this, too. To come to the doors of our hearts,
and say "I can help."

To enter in to whatever mess exists in our own lives,
whatever hurt or loss or failing or grief,
and to help clean it up.

"He will be like the dawn from on high," promised Zechariah,
"he will guide our feet."

Advent is when we admit it: we need help.

Advent is when us kids, God's children, together *and* one-by-one,
come up against the reality that we're really not ready to live by ourselves ...
and in fact, never will be.

That's Advent:

Admitting that we can't figure out on our own how this is supposed to work.

Admitting that as human beings we've made a colossal mess.

Advent is *calling for help*....

and then opening the door to the one who stands there with everything we need.

"By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness
to guide our feet into the way of peace." Amen.