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SPRING CLEANING

One of the prominent aspects of Passover (which starts the evening of April 23, 2005) is spring-cleaning. This practice is based on Exodus 12:19, which says, “seven days there shall be no leaven found in your houses.” In order to adhere to that command the entire house must be cleaned and all leaven removed. You can’t know that there is no leaven in the house if there is a part of the house that has not been thoroughly cleaned.

On the evening before Passover starts, observant Jewish families make one last sweep of the house to make sure all leaven is removed. Many leave a few crumbs in an obvious place so the blessing on removing leaven will not be a wasted blessing. Then the children “find” the leaven and sweep it into a wooden spoon using a feather. The following morning all the remaining leaven, including that last “found” portion is burned in fire, along with the spoon. Thus the house is purged of all leaven for the seven days of Passover.

This spring-cleaning is so much a part of the preparation for Passover that it has even become routine for many non-Jews. They are not doing it to look for leftover leaven, but as a convenient time to prepare for a new year. New beginning of life, some think, calls for a new beginning with a clean house.

There is a sense in which we need to do a complete house cleaning more often than once a spring. We are our own house, and sin is the leaven we need to clean out. That is not to say that leaven always represents sin, but there are times when we should search out sin in our lives just like cleaning the leaven at Passover.

Even from the first recorded sin, the picture of a house being attacked by it was presented. “And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door.” (Gen 4:6-7)

Tzaraat, sometimes translated leprosy, was an infection that only affected people, clothing, and houses. It was not like the Hansen’s disease, which is known as leprosy today. If anything, it was more commonly a miraculous or God induced infection. The rabbis say that it was caused by a number of sins, most notably gossip or

slander. In every case in the scriptures when someone was stricken with the disease it was directly or indirectly a result of their slanderous or belittling attitude. That such a disease could also strike the house of such a person shows that sin can permeate every part of a person’s life. The Law, in Leviticus 14:34-53, shows how to deal with *tzaraat* in a house. First you take out the stones that are affected and scrape all the plaster and mortar around them. If, after the stones are replaced and the wall is replastered, the house is still infected, all the beams and stones and mortar are to be removed. Yes, that means the house is essentially destroyed. If the plague does not return, however, the house was to be cleansed by a designated sacrifice.

Sin is like that in our houses. Sometimes it takes minor repairs to remove it. We may clean the house and it remain clean. At other times, sin is persistent. It requires a thorough and drastic spring-cleaning because a dusting just won’t do. Sometimes we have to take our lives apart to see what sin is doing to us—to see how deep it goes.

Leaven can hide in the most difficult places. Sin has a way of hiding where we don’t want to look. Have you ever had company coming on short notice, so you clean all but one bedroom, and just shut the door to that room? (I know I am not the only person who does that.) Sometimes we like to do that with sin. We clean the whole house except for the one room we know houses our pet sin. Before we can confess our sins to God, we must clean the whole house. We must get all the sin out in the open. Only then can we be ready for God’s Passover. Only when we uncover our sins ourselves can God cover them, and pass over us, holding us guiltless.

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TWELVE MEN GOOD & TRUE

This article is longer than usual, taking up the space normally devoted to two articles. In keeping with the idea of “minutes” with Messiah, I have broken it up into shorter segments that can be read one or two at a time.

And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles. (Luke 6:12-13)

Out of a number of followers, and after a night of prayer, Jesus chose twelve men and designated them ambassadors. These twelve men, out of hundreds, were to be his special representatives on earth, both during his time here and after his ascension to God. We know from Acts 1 that there were others who spent most of the ministry of Jesus with the Master, but these were hand picked by him. We know a few of them well, one in particular, and others hardly at all. Who were these men? What qualified them to be his ambassadors?

Inseparable, ambitious,
loyal. Just the qualities
you want in an
ambassador.

The brothers

Perhaps the best known of these twelve are the two sets of brothers: Simon and Andrew, and James and John. Three of these seem to have been even special among the twelve.

What can we say about Simon, whom Jesus called the rock (Peter), that has not been said? When it comes to highs and lows, Peter can be counted on to be there. He is the one we all would like to be, but also the one we know we are. The preacher of the first recorded gospel was also the one who three times denied that he knew Jesus. The man who walked on water was rebuked for using his sword in Gethsemane. Some even say that Jesus may have given him the name Peter as something to live up to because he started out as anything but a rock. In the consular service, Peter would be the loose cannon that a ruler both loved and feared; loved because of his superior ability and feared

because he could be the least tactful ambassador in history. Maybe he was always listed first because everybody knew and respected Peter. Maybe it was because Peter was Everyman.

Andrew was Peter's brother. As often happens when one brother is brash and impetuous, the other brother was quiet and conciliatory. Peter could antagonize anyone. Andrew was the people person. When we read about Andrew, what is he doing? John seems to bring out Andrew's qualities as an ambassador more than any other writer. Andrew was one of the first disciples of Jesus. But before he followed Jesus, "He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ. And he brought him to Jesus." (Jn 1:41-42) When Jesus was teaching five thousand men in the wilderness, and the other apostles were discussing what to do to feed them all, what did Andrew do? He brought a person to Jesus. True, the lad only had a small lunch, but he brought him anyway and Jesus used his lunch to feed the multitude. (Jn 6:8-9) The next time John mentions Andrew it is five days before Jesus was crucified. They are in Jerusalem for Passover and a number of Hellenist Jews come to Philip saying they want to meet Jesus. Philip, apparently naturally, goes to Andrew with their request. "Andrew and Philip tell Jesus." (John 12:22) Jesus may have picked Andrew because Andrew was the type of person who was approachable and approaching. He could talk to anybody, and would bring anybody to Jesus.

Then there were James and John bar Zebedee. He may have known them well enough to know what they were like even as they grew up. There is some scriptural evidence that they may have been his cousins. Whether or not that is true, they were business partners with Peter and Andrew. When they all followed Jesus the other fishermen in their area must have wondered that the competition just put down their nets and walked away. But this is the way these brothers were. They were inseparable. They were ambitious. And they were loyal. These are just the qualities one would want in an ambassador. Cousins or not, these two men were as close to Jesus as any could be. In the gospels, James is never mentioned without his brother, and John is rarely mentioned without James. If John was, as he calls himself, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," then James could not be far behind. James was executed within a few years of Jesus' death. (Acts 12:2) John was probably the last apostle to die. Yet each served his lord to the utmost. If I am like Peter at his worst, and am not a people person like Andrew, then maybe what I aspire to be is like the sons of Zebedee.

The sons

In addition to the sons of Zebedee and Simon Peter son of Jonah, some of the other apostles were designated as sons. There was James the son of Alphaeus. All we know about him is his father's name. Other than in the lists of the twelve, the gospels are silent about this apostle.

One apostle appears to have had three names. Matthew mentions Lebbaeus whose surname was Thaddaeus (Matt 10:3). In the same place in the order of names, Luke mentions Judas the son (or brother) of James (Lk 6:16). Most likely, he was named Judas Lebbaeus and was the son of James Thaddaeus. That's a lot of speculation, but since we don't know anything else about this other Judas, who is apparently also called Lebbaeus, speculation is all we have.

We don't know anything else about these apostles. However, there may be a lesson in their being on the lists. A few things are important in life. One of those is a family name. These apostles show that a good family name, that is one that is honored, will live on from one generation to the next. The fathers' names live on in the Bible through the ambassadorship of the sons.

One other apostle is commonly known only by his father's name. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke he is called Bartholomew. This name is probably from the Jewish "bar Thalmai" which would mean the son of Ptolemy. Thus he is possibly of Egyptian descent. John is the only one who calls him by his given name, Nathanael. He is also the only writer who tells us anything about the man. If we are assigning groups to the apostles, Nathanael might be the ambassador to the racists, or maybe the skeptics. When his friend, Philip, told him that he had found the Messiah, and that he was from Nazareth, Nathanael responded, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46) In his mind, anyone from near this city must be a bumpkin, at best. Of course, he neglects to remember that the prophet Jonah came from the vicinity of Nazareth. That is typical of pigeonholing by race, ethnicity, or locality. We tend to forget the good and remember the bad. Jesus called him "an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile." (Jn 1:47) If he was a racist or a skeptic, at least he didn't try to hide it. This is the kind of person who is most likely to change, because he is at least honest with himself. Those who try to fool others usually end up fooling only themselves. In spite of this poor beginning, Jesus picked Nathanael Bartholomew as an apostle. He knew, and predicted, great things for this man, because he was open in his dealings with people.

The Politicians

Philip, as indicated above, was probably of Greek ancestry. His name was Greek. He was the one that

Grecian Jews came to. As such, he may have been the only member of the sect of the Sadducees among the apostles. The Sadducees were generally Jews who accepted Hellenistic (Greek) philosophy and culture. They tried to adapt the Temple rituals to Greek ways, with little success. Where they were successful was the political arena, the Sanhedrin. If Philip was a Sadducee he was probably wealthy, politically liberal, but religiously conservative. He might have had some difficulty accepting all of the teachings of Jesus, who tended to take the Pharisaic view. Considering the political and religious climate of the time, it is likely that Jesus had at least one Sadducee apostle. Most likely Philip was the one to represent the Messiah to the Hellenistic Jews. If so, that would put him in direct opposition to two other apostles.

Matthew the Levite was, by occupation, a tax collector. With his priestly background and his position as a Roman employee he may have actually leaned more toward the Sadducees, except that the Hellenists and the Romans did not always agree on political and cultural issues. Matthew may have been the outcast of the apostles. He was a tax collector, and the Pharisees often lumped

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them with "sinners" or harlots. It was easy to become a tax collector. All you had to do was pay the Roman government the total tax burden for a particular area. Then you went out and collected taxes to make up your losses. This system was open for abuse, because the tax collector made his profit by collecting more than he had paid to the government—often much more. They were often rightly equated with loan sharks. Such was Matthew. In the middle of tax season, though, he gave up tax collecting to follow Jesus. This meant that he probably took a considerable financial loss the first year. But he was probably the ambassador to the downtrodden. He could go where many "righteous" people would not go, and associate with people that Jesus might not otherwise be able to reach. He probably also served as a buffer between Philip and another apostle.

All we know about the "other Simon" is that he was a Canaanite and a Zealot. The term Canaanite may refer to a semi-pagan religious background, or it may simply mean that he could trace his lineage back to the conquest under Joshua. That he was a Zealot is more significant. This man was known as a militant opponent of the Roman government. He probably originally looked at Jesus as the Messiah who would

lead a revolt against the Romans and restore Palestine to the Jews. He was probably the first apostle among those mentioned in Acts 1:6. “When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” He still couldn’t see through the physical to the spiritual. In that respect, Simon may be the apostle to many people today, who still anticipate a physical kingdom on earth.

Three political viewpoints; three apostles. If anyone needs to see that Jesus was the Messiah to all men, he only has to look as far as these three names in the list of the apostles.

The twin and the betrayer

The final two apostles are Thomas the Twin and Judas of Kerioth. Although Matthew may have been the outcast at the time, these two are the outcasts of the apostles ever since. They have come down to our time in such phrases as “doubting Thomas” and “the Judas kiss.”

Thomas has undeservedly gotten some bad press. This is the man who once said, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” (Jn 11:16) He paid attention to Jesus, and was sorely disappointed with his death. Naturally he was doubtful of the resurrection; who among us wouldn’t have been? Yet after having said that he would have to actually touch the wounds, when it came down to it he expressed joy and faith just at seeing Jesus. Yes, it took seeing, but that was less than what he had declared it would take. One time he doubted, just as the other apostles had doubted. Jesus didn’t pick him because he was a doubter, though. He picked him because he was a believer. We all may weaken at times, like Thomas, but we can recover, just as he did.

Judas of Kerioth. He was a thief and a betrayer. He was a suicide. He sold out for a handful of

coins. His name has become so hated that in English we don’t call the book of the Bible by another Judas by that name but by “Jude.” Of the three great betrayers of history—Judas, Benedict Arnold, and Quisling—the name of Judas stands out. And yet Jesus, who knew he would betray him, included Judas among his twelve ambassadors. There were other disciples who were constantly with him. He could have kept Judas among them and still have been betrayed to the Romans. Yet he picked Judas as one of the twelve. Why? Only Jesus knows. But he must have seen something in him worthy of elevation. Because of that, Judas may truly be the apostle to all of us. Not because he committed suicide instead of facing his failure, but because of his failure. Judas is our apostle because we all fail. We sin and disappoint God. “By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” (Rom 5:12) Would we have—do we—betray Jesus? Maybe not. But do we disappoint him? Certainly. Do we sin, and fail to live up to his expectations? Definitely. Do we have an apostle who shows us how to deal with sin by showing us how not to deal with it. His name is Judas.

Jesus picked twelve men and called them ambassadors. They are his representatives to a lost world. Why did he need apostles? One answer is that he was not going to be around. But in the long picture, neither are they. These twelve men died around 1900 years ago. But they continue to be the ambassadors of the Messiah to a lost world. Maybe it was because they could do the one thing he did not do. They could sin. They could tell the world, “He was perfect and the sacrifice for sin. I know. I was the sinner.” Whatever the reason that he picked them, he picked them for their variety. Even inseparable James and John were different. In this world that celebrates diversity it would be hard to find a more diverse group. *Vive le difference!*

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