

April 9: Mark 4-6 Devotional
“Clean Clothes” (Mark 5:24-34, 6:56).

“Ask the priests this question about the law: ‘If one of you is carrying a holy sacrifice in his robes and happens to brush against some bread or wine or meat, will it too become holy?’” ‘No,’ the priests replied. ‘Holiness does not pass to other things that way.’ Then Haggai asked, ‘But if someone touches a dead person, and so becomes ceremonially impure, and then brushes against something, does it become contaminated?’ And the priests answered, ‘Yes’” (Haggai 2:11-13, The Living Bible).
“Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them” (Mark 9:2-3, New King James Version).
“Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?’ I said to him, ‘Sir, you know.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’” (Revelation 7:13-14, English Standard Version).

I'm fond of saying that I like the word “clean” as an adjective, not as a verb. I mean that I like things to be clean, but I dislike all the hard labour it takes to keep them that way. Why does “clean” have to take so much work? Because of the downhill-effect of the curse of sin on our fallen planet, any undesirable state is its default, and even maintenance level takes enormous effort.

From the Mark 4-6 reading (and skipping ahead to Mark 7-9), the words “clean” and “unclean” jumped out at me as themes. Mark uses these Jewish-law-categories as common descriptors.

Haggai 2:11-13 asks an obvious question about these two categories: Which is transferable: dirt or cleanliness? “Well, duh!” Haggai's audience must have been thinking. Unlike dirt, cleanliness is non-transmissible. If dirty touches clean, the clean doesn't make dirty clean. The dirty makes the clean dirty.

And this obvious physical fact is an obvious spiritual fact, as well. The “uncleanness” of sin is our default state. Thinking we can keep ourselves in a lasting state of sinlessness is like thinking I don't need to wash my clothes ever again because I did laundry last week. Our efforts to clean up our own lives will never succeed because of the cold, hard facts of the nature of uncleanness.

The practical problem of evil in our world is how to deal with it. And the standard answer of, “Do better, try harder,” has failed. Spectacularly. Uncleanness is our default state, and cleanness is non-transmissible.

Except for one exceptional exception.

Notice the mysterious behaviour of Jesus' clothes in Mark 5:24-34 and 6:56. Unlike the scenario of Haggai 2, Jesus' particular brand of holiness (powerful perfection) had the effect of making the ceremonially unclean clean by a single touch (when mixed with the faith of those reaching out to him).

In fact, Jesus' own brand of cleaning agent (“the blood of the Lamb”) is the only cleaner on earth that can finally deal with our sin problem. All other efforts are exhausting. And endless. And futile.

But reaching out in faith for the slightest touch of Jesus, even just a metaphorical brush against the hem of his garment (his “robe of righteousness” with which He promises to clothe all those willing to be so-clothed in Isaiah 61:10) is the only way for the unclean to become truly and finally clean.