Clean Your Windows

Mark 4:26-34; 2 Corinthians 5:14-17
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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If the writing experts are to be believed, a good title makes all the difference in the world.

In a world where people are reading less and less, where our attention spans are shrinking down to the size of Twitter-sized digital morsels, if you don't grab people with an interesting, provocative, or even flat out weird headline and a catchy first paragraph, you probably won't grab them at all.

This week, I read a book with a title that probably meets all three of those requirements. Interesting, provocative, and weird, particularly for a book on faith in the twenty-first century! It's called *Hunting for Magic Eels*.[1]

According to the author, Richard Beck, the title of the book comes out of a legend from the country of Wales. Apparently, there was a holy well on Llanddwyn Island that contained "enchanted eels." The well was associated with a certain St. Dwynwen who was a fifth century Celtic saint and the patron saint of lovers.

According to the legend, these enchanted eels could predict your romantic future. This was done by the woman scattering breadcrumbs on the surface of the water, then laying her handkerchief over top of them. If the eels came to the surface and disturbed these tokens, then her lover would be faithful.

There was a shrine created and visitors would leave offerings at this shrine. It became a popular place of pilgrimage and quite wealthy at least until the times of the Tudors. There was a substantial chapel built there in the 16th century.

And then, people began to lose interest in the magic eels. After the Protestant Reformation, visits to the Llanddwyn Island began to dwindle. Today, the church is little more than an abandoned ruin.

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[1] Richard Beck, *Hunting Magic Eels: Recovering an Enchanted Faith in a Skeptical Age* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021).

The story of the magic eels is obviously a metaphor. For much of human history, human beings lived in what Beck calls an "enchanted" world.

The world was filled with angels and demons and fairies and sprites. There were holy relics and holy water and prayers to saints with special powers and pilgrimages. Holy communion itself the greatest miracle whereby Jesus was physically present in bread and wine.

There were all kinds of forces outside of human psychology and biology that had to be appeased and manipulated and avoided. There was magic and mystery and no small amount of terror of the unknown. The world sizzled and crackled with spiritual energy, whether for good or for evil.

At the risk of stating the blindingly obvious, we don't live in such a world anymore, at least not in the West. You may have noticed this.

Science and technology have, we think, taken over and explained much of what people used to attribute to the divine or magic. The Enlightenment bid adieu to the superstitions of the Dark Ages.

The Protestant Reformation led to a new understanding of Christian faith where the point wasn't about *encountering* God in the miraculous or in icons and religious imagery; instead, the point became to *understand* God and what God wanted from human beings.

We live downstream of this massive cultural shift. Faith, where it remains in the twenty-first century west, has become one of two things.

Either it is rationalistic, shorn of its most miraculous elements in favour of theological precision (believing the right things) and proper ethics (being a good person).

Or it becomes therapeutic. God is conceived of as mainly as an extension of ourselves. God's main role is to validate our need for meaning, comfort, self-esteem, and self-expression.

And of course, many people don't believe in anything at all. Or at least they say they don't.

As a culture we *have left* or *are leaving* God and the enchanted world behind. Our story is one of disenchantment. We're too modern and sophisticated and enlightened for any of that stuff.

But there's a problem according to Beck. As a culture, we're not doing so well in this disenchanted world.

We can't live with the scientific picture of ourselves—that we're just another animal, nothing more than biological organisms living meaningless lives in a big chunk of rock hurtling through space.

We long for more than this, even if we've cut ourselves off from any kind of vocabulary that might express this longing.

Here's how Beck puts it:

> Everywhere you look… you see this longing for God… People are in pain. **But we've lost the ability to correctly name and diagnose the hurt**… What I am pointing out is how very unwell we are as a society. The evidence is everywhere… [R]ates of suicide, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and addiction are all on the rise, especially among young people. So we have to ask, What's causing us so much pain? Why is there so much hurt? Why is everyone feeling so anxious, unsettled, and fragile in this skeptical age?

Beck calls this "The Ache." He sees it in the college students he teaches, in the prisoners he visits in the jail, in the mostly liberal social circles he travels in, in the little church he attends.

The Ache is characterized by a deep dissatisfaction with our disenchanted world in at least four ways:

1. We aren't satisfied with a world where nothing is deemed real unless it can be explained by science
2. We aren't satisfied with a world where nothing is deemed sacred, however confused we might be about what that term might mean
3. We have a deep need for meaning but aren't sure where to find it.
4. We have this sense that we need something more stable and durable than ourselves to worship.

Beck sums it up like this: "God may be dead, but we sure do miss him."

Indeed. We probably don't want to go back to a world where magic eels were thought capable of predicting our romantic lives, but we long for a more enchanted world.

According to Beck, the problem isn't that we once imagined God to be everywhere and now, in the modern world, we realize that we were wrong.

It's that we've shifted how and to what we pay attention. "Disenchantment isn't about disbelief. Disenchantment is a failure to *attend*."

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Jesus' parables this morning have a lot to do with how we attend to our world.

The kingdom of God is like a bunch of seed that a farmer scattered, Jesus says, and then just kind of went and had a nap and waited for it to grow.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, Jesus says. Something small and seemingly insignificant that becomes a source of shelter.

These are not impressive metaphors, on the face of it. We might have preferred it if Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is like a mighty wave, crashing into the shore" or "the kingdom of God is like a flash of lightning across a stormy sky, where everything is illuminated in an instant" or "the kingdom of God is like a mighty army that defeats its enemy with barely a whiff of resistance."

Throwing a bunch of seed on the ground and putting your feet up? Mustard seeds? We might be forgiven for longing for more obviously transformative imagery. *C'mon, Jesus! Our world needs more radical change than these quaint agricultural metaphors!*

And yet this is Jesus' way. Even beyond these two parables, Jesus consistently described the kingdom in profoundly earthy metaphors drawn from ordinary life. I did a search this week on all the "kingdom is like" references in the gospels.

The kingdom is like a man who sowed seed…
The kingdom is like yeast that a woman making bread…
The kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field…
The kingdom is like a merchant looking for fine pearls…
The kingdom is like a fishing expedition…
The kingdom is like the owner of a house digging around in his storeroom…
The kingdom is like a king who sorting out the payroll with his servants…
The kingdom is like a landowner hiring workers for his vineyard…
The kingdom of heaven is like a king throwing a lavish for his son…

Fields, marketplaces, work, banquets, human relationships. Jesus seems to be saying, the kingdom isn't some magic otherworldly reality; it's already among you.

It's a persistent question that demands an answer. It's an itch that needs scratching. It's a response to the ache of existence.

It's a voice calling out to each one of us all the time, speaking of grace, of mercy, of joy, urging us to set aside that which has no value and will not last, changing how and what we value and why.

It refocuses our vision on what seems small and insignificant, what seems crazy and impractical, and says, "Here, pay attention, this is what life is about, this is the point of it all. Don't sleepwalk through this life you've been given. Don't settle on the surface of things."

Above all, it says, "You matter. God loves you. You are not just a random collection of molecules. You are part of a story that began in, is sustained by, and is moving toward love."

At the conclusion of our gospel reading from Mark, it says, "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables" (Mark 4:33)

I think at least part of what Jesus is doing in all these parables, all of these "the kingdom of God is likes," is inviting us into the reality that there is more going on than we realize in our world and in our lives, even if it isn't always easy to see.

He's telling us to slow down and evaluate things differently. We live and move and have our beings in a culture that is obsessed with results.

Yet the kingdom's "results" aren't always obvious. They are slow moving, gradual, unhurried. There are fallow periods where nothing seems to be happening.

And then one day, something beautiful exists. Or, rather, something has always existed, we just see it finally. It has been growing all around us all this time and we had very little to do with it. It comes to us and to our world as a pure gift.

We need to attend to our world and to our lives differently. In many ways, this is the central task of faith.

God has not left our disenchanted world; we've just stopped noticing that, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins famously said, "the whole earth is charged with the grandeur of God."

Even the seemingly mundane, the small, the unimpressive, the ordinary. It is all holy because it is all the seedbed of God's slow, patient, work of transformation in our world and in our lives.

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J.R.R. Tolkien talked once about how we need to "clean our windows" to see the world truly.

Our windows easily get smudged and dirty. We settle for partial and distorted visions of our world and our own lives. We lack the capacity for wonder, for surprise, for mystery, for the sacred.

Jesus wants us to see the world as it is, as it could be, and as it will be.

But we need to get into the habit of looking differently, attending differently.

In our second reading this morning, Paul puts it this way:

> From now on, therefore, *we regard no one from a human point of view*; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

You know what I'm going to say next, right? What question are we supposed to ask whenever we see the word "therefore" in Scripture? "What is the therefore there for?"

Why are we to no longer regard anyone from a merely human point of view? Why are we supposed to look at everything and everyone through the lens of new creation, even though new creation has not come in fullness yet, even while this old creation still groans?

We only need to rewind two verses to learn what the therefore is there for:

> For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, ***therefore***, *we regard no one from a human point of view…*

From now on, therefore, we look, we attend, we expect, differently.

As is so often the case, Jesus' parables work on multiple levels. Jesus is not just teaching about the nature of the kingdom and how we are to pay attention in the world, important as these things are.

He is also but pointing ahead to his own death and resurrection.

Jesus is the mustard seed.

In the twelfth chapter of John's gospel, as the clouds are darkening and Jesus' death is drawing near, he says these words:

> The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds (John 12:23-24).

This tiny seed planted in the earth has become the Saviour of the whole earth. The message of Christ has spread far beyond a single people and place and made its way out into every tribe and tongue.

It has become the "greatest of all shrubs," providing shade, shelter, hope, mercy to all.

It is the love of Christ, clearly and definitively revealed on Calvary's cross, that urges us on. It is this love that changes the lens through which we look at everything.

So, may we regard no one from a merely human point of view any longer. May we not be content to stay on the surface of things.

May we clean our windows and look at all the world through the clear vision of new creation.

May we realize that there is still a divine energy sizzling and crackling through the cosmos, even in the most humble and ordinary of things, if only we have eyes to see it.

Amen.