

“The Windshield Effect”

A sermon given by Rev. Ian Gregory Cummins
to the congregation at
Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church of Denver

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Scripture: Luke 3: 1-6

I sometimes think of John the Baptist as the Edward Abbey of his day. I don't really know enough about either man to say that. I just know Edward Abbey – the 20th century writer and environmentalist - sported a ragged beard, drank a lot, and was a bit of an anarchist...and that's pretty much how I imagine John as he stomped around the Jordan wilderness, proclaiming his “baptism of repentance.”

In Greek the word for ‘repentance’ is ‘metanoia’, which literally means ‘beyond the mind’. When John says he wants people to ‘repent’, he has more than an apology in mind. He’s saying they need a radical change in business as usual; a complete reimagining of one’s viewpoint.

With this sermon approaching, these thoughts were beginning to swirl around my mind on the Saturday after Thanksgiving. I’m standing outside the Atlanta airport, having just dropped off my wife and daughter for their flight back to Denver. In a few hours, they’ll be home. My son and I will take three days to drive across the country in a rented Jeep Cherokee with a cedar canoe I built this summer with my dad strapped to the top. For you visual learners there’s a photo of my son and the boat on the back of your bulletin.

Now you have to understand, this canoe is *very* special to me. Not only did I spend 3 weeks building it with my dad, it’s also...well, I don’t know how else to put it - it’s gorgeous. It turned out far better than I imagined. And if I could have figured out how to fit the boat inside the car and strap my son to the top, I might have done it.

Because as we’re standing there about to start our epic journey, three things are worrying me. I’m worried the boat could be stolen. I’m worried it could fly off the car at 70 miles an hour. And I’m worried that by the time we get home, the front of it will be encrusted in a layer of smashed bugs.

To address my first concern, we spend Saturday night in what is probably the worst motel I have ever stayed in (which is saying something) so that I can drive the car right up to the door and take the canoe inside with us like it’s some kind of beloved pet.

My second worry, that the boat could take flight, seems like it could come true on our second day, as we cross the Oklahoma prairie because the wind is topping 40 miles per hour. I can see the tip of the boat through the windshield jerking back and forth like a panicked squirrel.

So I ask Siri where the nearest Walmart is, figuring that like Starbucks in Denver, in Oklahoma there's bound to be one close by. And sure enough there's one just down the road. So we stop and purchase two more nylon ratchet straps to put *around* the boat and *through* the car so that now, if the boat blows away...the roof of the Jeep is going with it.

It's also in Oklahoma that I begin to notice that *every* time we stop for gas, someone comes over to admire the boat. It turns out that this boat is a magnet for middle-aged, bearded men. They're like moths to a flame - I can't keep them away.

Finally, after three long days on the road...we pull up to our house. As I unload the boat and give it a good inspection, I'm a little surprised, but grateful, to find not one bug splattered to the front. My precious boat is safely home. (Oh, and my son, too, of course.)

In the days that follow, I don't think much about the fact that there wasn't a single bug on the canoe...after all, it is November, not July. But then I come across a piece in the New York Times entitled, *The Insect Apocalypse is Here*.

Bugs - at one level they are the form of wildlife we know best. They are the undomesticated and uninvited creatures living in our homes, intruding on our picnics, and pestering us along our hiking trails. We interact with moths, mosquitoes and flies; ants, spiders and bees much more than we do most other wild animals. In fact, most of us probably think we know them a little too well.

But at another level, insects are one of our planet's great mysteries. Scientists have identified about one million different species of insects – a stupefying array of thrips, firebrats, antlions and froghoppers. We've discovered 12,000 types of ants, 20,000 different kinds of bees, and 400,000 species of beetle.

And yet, entomologists estimate that this is only about 20 percent of the 10 quintillion insects alive on the planet. If 10 quintillion is hard to imagine, think of it this way: For every person on the planet, there are about 200 million insects...and four-fifths of them, the vast majority of them, we know nothing about. This, like the actual number of stars in the sky, and that Alaskan Husky on YouTube who can say "I love you" ...blows-my-mind.

<https://www.si.edu/spotlight/buginfo/bugnos>

But here's the really mind-blowing thing. In German nature preserves, the place where this has been studied most thoroughly, over the last 27 years the number of flying insects has diminished by 75%. Or if you prefer your depressing statistics closer to home, here in the US, over the last 20 years, monarch butterfly populations have fallen by 90%. And the rusty-

patched bumblebee that once buzzed through 28 states, dropped by 87% over the same period. Think about those numbers. That's not just a 'decline' in population, that's a holocaust.

It turns out not many scientists had been keeping track of how many insects there are – no one thought they would need to. And since they're so small, it's been easy to miss how things have been changing in the bug world. But in recent years people started noticing fewer bugs in everyday places, like on car windshields, thus dubbing it the windshield phenomenon, or as I call it, the canoe phenomenon.

Of course, it's not just the bugs that are dying faster than we can count them. This summer, researchers returned to the world's largest king penguin colony. They hadn't been there for 30 years. They discovered that it has shrunk from 500,000 breeding pairs to just 60,000. 97% of the bluefin tuna that once swam the oceans are gone. The number of Sophie the Giraffe toys sold in France in a single year is nine times the number of all the giraffes still living in Africa.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/31/science/king-penguin-decline-antarctica.html>

But there's something about disappearing insects that has rattled me more than all the reports on species decline, rising sea levels and climate change. I've been telling myself that we'll be able to fix these things before they get too bad. But learning about the insect apocalypse changed something for me. IT made it real for me just how bad things have gotten.

After all, insects pollinate three-fourths of our food. And they're the recycling professionals - breaking down everything from cow patties to fallen trees to animal carcasses. Think, for a minute, about a world where that doesn't happen. And by eating and being eaten, they are nature's fuel supply. We worry about saving the grizzly bear, but how long will the grizzly last without bees to pollinate the berries it eats, or without the flies that feed the salmon it eats? How long will *we* last?

"Repent!" said John the Baptist. You have to change your ways. John was, we know, a great lover of insects – especially for breakfast. But even he could never have imagined 2,000 years ago that humans would some day have the power to kill off the locust. If he were alive today, preaching his baptism of repentance, would he not be on the front lines of the fight to save this world.

Now we could talk about the importance of recycling, and clean energy, and carbon footprints. But you've heard all that before. And more importantly, that's not the problem. Or at least, that's not the root problem. Before we address this as a political, or economic, or justice issue...we have to understand that this is fundamentally a spiritual issue.

We have mistaken our importance and we have misunderstood our place within creation. We have thought God loved us too much and that God loved the giraffe and the penguin and the dung beetle too little.

And we need to repent for this. We need a *metanoia*. We need to go beyond the current state of our mind, and *radically* reimagine our place in this world.

We must develop a much deeper appreciation for the sacredness of the world around us. We must see that the value of the natural world is not in its usefulness to us, but in its own, God-born and God-loved, inherent worth. And then we must begin to see ourselves as a *part* of that sacredness - connected to it, dependent upon it, and not indispensable to it. Because as tragic as it is what is happening to the insects, odds are *they* will survive our recklessness.

But it may already be too late for us. It took learning about the insects apocalypse to make that really hit home for me. What will it take for you? At a practical level I have two suggestions. First, I encourage you to read The Insect Apocalypse article. Maybe like me, it takes bugs to get your attention. And second, I encourage you to get connected with our new Earth Care ministry or some other environmentally minded group.

Because if we have any hope of reversing this, it's going to be done together. A big part of the problem with the environmental crisis is that our individual efforts are just a drop in the ocean, and we know it. How much impact does it really have when I recycle my Starbucks lid if most of its 4 billion cups end up in landfills each year?

Our power and our hope is in our numbers. The windshield phenomenon is the result of the incredible power of our collective action. The incredible *destructive* power of our collective action. But windshields wipe both ways. We clearly have more power than we thought. And at least in theory, we can use that power to fix what we've broken - if we work together.

But it starts with a collective *metanoia*. We need to see the world and our place in it very differently. And that challenge is enormous, but we have to try.

Because I didn't build that boat for nothing. I want my children to inherit it, and I want them to take it out into the wild places of this world. And I want them to understand themselves not as having dominion over that world, but as humble stewards of it. And I want them to love and appreciate how holy and mysterious and awe-inspiring God's creation is. And I want them to come back from those wild places refreshed and renewed... and complaining...about all the bugs there were.

Primary source: The Insect Apocalypse is Here (New York Times)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/27/magazine/insect-apocalypse.html>