

Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 3:1-6

Second Sunday in Advent, Year C
Midway Presbyterian Church
December 5, 2021

A Time for Refinement

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

It is thought that the book that contains our Old Testament Lesson for this Second Sunday of Advent was written in the period of the Exile, following the dedication of the Second Temple in 515 B.C. Malachi is the Hebrew word for “my messenger.” It may be the self-designation of a priest speaking out against the practices of his colleagues and congregation. Some ancient sources assume the messenger to be Ezra, others Mordecai. Yet others wonder if it might be Elijah. Listen to these words from Malachi 3:1-4...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Of the four gospel writers, Luke operates with the most self-conscious sense of being a historian. That can be clearly seen in our Gospel Lesson today where he names not just one or two historical figures to anchor his story, but in fact seven leaders both secular and religious. Alongside this august company, John is nothing but a small-town priest, found here out in the wilderness. And yet the prophetic word comes to this same John. Listen to these words from Luke 3:1-6...

Sermon

Elie Wiesel is the Jewish writer and Nobel Prize winner who was imprisoned in Hitler’s concentration camps at Auschwitz, Buna, and Buchenwald. He writes of that experience in the work entitled *Night*. When Elie was a boy, his mother would greet him every day as he came home from school. And every day she would ask him the same question. Not, “What did you do

today?” or “What did you learn today?” or “Did you have a good day at school?” No, she would merely ask, “Did you ask a good question today?”

Well, in the four chapters of Malachi the writer asked some good questions for his day. “How has God loved us?” (1:2) “Has not one God created us?” (2:10) “How shall we return to God?” (3:7) In the 55 verses that make up the Prophetic book, this last book in the Old Testament, 22 questions are posed. Thereby, through a question-and-answer style of writing, prophet and people become partners in critical reflection on the nature of God and self-critical reflection on the conduct of Israel.

Now the word of the Lord came to Malachi as a word of promise. “I am sending my messenger.” But there are elements of the promise that are challenging, to say the least. Hear again verse 2 of our lesson:

But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and fuller’s soap.

The priests knew what God required, yet their sacrifices were unworthy and their service insincere. They were lazy, arrogant, and insensitive, with a casual attitude toward the worship of God and the observance of God’s standards. They fell woefully short in what our *Book of Order* lists as one of the Great Ends of the Church—“the maintenance of divine worship.” And the people had not learned the lesson of the Exile, nor had they heeded the prophets’ words. Men were casually divorcing their faithful wives to marry younger pagan women. There was sorcery, adultery, perjury, defrauding of the weak, and a disregard for foreigners. Thus did they ignore God’s law and threaten the religious training of the children. But pride had hardened their hearts.

The prophet declares that through God’s messenger a judgment will come suddenly and surprisingly. Who can endure? A purification process will be set in motion. It will be like a refiner’s fire, whose purpose is to remove impurities and strengthen that which is being refined.

John Calvin said:

The power of the fire, we know, is twofold: for it burns and it purifies; it burns what is corrupt; but it purifies gold and silver from their dross.
(*Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*)

And today on this Second Sunday of Advent, we might ask ourselves, “What exactly in my life is in need of refining?” “How much will it hurt?” “What will I have to give up?” “What do I need to do, or stop doing, in order that I be refined like gold and silver.”

We find that in the process of refining metals, the raw metal is heated with fire until it melts. The impurities separate from it and rise to the surface. They are skimmed off, leaving the pure metal. Without this heating and melting, there could be no purifying. As the impurities are skimmed off the top, the reflection of the worker appears in the smooth, pure surface. As we are purified by God, his reflection in our lives will become more and more clear to those around us, as the image of God is renewed in us.

Now the church has traditionally understood Malachi’s prophetic promise to be fulfilled in the person and message of John the Baptist. John was the last proclaimer of our Lord before his coming, and the only one of his prophets to actually see and worship him. And in our gospel lesson from Luke 3 we read of the word of God coming to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. And thus does he go forth in the region all around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it was written in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” (Luke 3:4b-6)

This Tuesday is Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day, for it was on December 7, 1941, that Japan's Imperial Navy carried out a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, an attack that killed 2,403 Americans and propelled the U.S. into World War II. It was a date that President Franklin Roosevelt said would live in infamy. And Pearl Harbor Day reminds us of the need for preparations, to be vigilant, ready for what may come.

We are told that when oriental kings made journeys into remote parts of their kingdoms, heralds were sent ahead to announce their coming. Roads had to be made where there were none; valleys had to be filled; and hills made low. Crooked roads had to be straightened and smoothed. Well, John the Baptist is a herald. A messenger who proclaimed, "The King of kings is coming! Prepare the way!"

C. S. Lewis said that when we really think about it, what we long for is not so much to possess beauty but to participate in it. We long to become a part of God's ways. In Luke 10:25 a lawyer asks Jesus, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This was a question not just about life that goes on and on, but a question about life that abides and really matters. Jesus' answer indicated that this would mean loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and one's neighbor as oneself. It would mean participating in God's love and compassion as did the Good Samaritan that Jesus told about. For an individual and for a people, that could mean getting a lot of things straight and repairing much that is crooked.

In the midst of rulers and priests comes one who is neither. But John the Baptist is God's messenger. And the word of God comes not in Rome, but in the wilderness. And like Malachi of old, the message involves change—repentance and refinement. Thus does this messenger of God remind us all of the need to prepare for the Christ who is to come. To heed his call to a repentance that leads to life, yea, salvation.

Every culture has stories about the anticipation involved in those nine months of waiting for a mother to give birth to a child. Such major events can come with mixed emotions. In the midst of joy at the prospect of new life, a new person to love and be loved by, there is yet some apprehension of the unknown involved, some concern about the changes that will need to be made. Some concern about the well-being of mother and child. Preparations need to be made.

How would God's refining fire affect a congregation of Presbyterians? Its worship, its stewardship, its Christian Education its prayers? So that our offerings "will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in former years." A prayer from *The Book of Common Worship* for the Second Sunday of Advent addresses God this way:

You sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation. Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. (Amen.)

Finally this: it has been noted that verses 1-3 of Malachi 3 appear in George Frederic Handel's great oratorio, "Messiah"—that much loved choral work of the Christmas season. The text from the *King James Bible* and *The Book of Common Prayer* was compiled by Charles Jennings. "The Lord, whom ye see shall suddenly come...But who may abide the day of his coming?...He shall purify the sons of Levi..." And then: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us."

We are told that after the first presentation of "Messiah" in London in 1741, Handel wrote to a friend: "I should be sorry if only I entertained them. I wished to make them better." And isn't that the goal of our worship, of our songs, of our sermons? Not simply to entertain, but to make us better? So that we might be an offering to the Lord in righteousness.

Although Handel was blind by 1751, until his death in 1759 at age 74, he conducted “Messiah” as an annual benefit for the Foundling Hospital in London, which served mostly widows and orphans of the clergy. Not just to entertain, but to make just and better.

My friends, Advent is not a time of entertainment. It’s a time of reflection. A time of hearing again the message of God’s messenger. A time of refinement—that makes us better.

Amen. And Amen.