

"PREPARE THE WAY"  
Malachi 3:1-4   Luke 1:67-79   Luke 3:1-6  
December 9, 2018   Advent Two  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
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From the Gospel of Luke:

*Chapter 3: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,<sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.<sup>3</sup> He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,<sup>4</sup> as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,*

*"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.  
<sup>5</sup> 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;  
<sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*

When someone says to you, "I really don't want to tell you this but I think you should know." Or "Don't get mad at me, but..." You know you are not going to be hearing good news. Most of us don't want to hear bad news. In the old days if someone brought bad news to the king, the king would have the messenger executed. How many times have you said, "Don't kill the messenger." It isn't easy being the messenger when the message you are about to deliver is hard to hear. When we share our joys and concerns in worship I just love sharing good news with you- letting you know about an illness healed, a new baby, a new job, or other happy things.

I really don't like sharing the bad news of a death or an illness or a tragedy. I look at your faces and I can see your pain and sorrow as you hear the message. I have been the bearer of bad news more times than I care to count. Even though I know the message isn't my fault, I still feel a measure of guilt for being the one to hand it to you.

You may have noticed that Scripture is filled with messengers. God tried in many and creative ways to get the divine message to the people. And you may have noticed that our Advent messengers aren't exactly Mr. Rogers. They aren't handing out sugar cookies and singing Christmas carols. In fact, the biblical messengers seem rather harsh and the words they speak are hard to hear. The strange thing is that these hard words are not bad news, they are actually good news. I guess your assessment of the goodness or badness of the news depends upon where you are sitting when you hear them. All of our Advent heralds call for radical, revolutionary reform- political, social, religious, economic, and personal reform.

Jeremiah, Malachi, Luke, and John, and even, of all people, Mary. Wait until you hear what she has to say next week. You won't believe it! She may be the most radical of all of God's messengers.

Last Sunday we heard the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, and the New Testament Gospel writer, Luke, issue words of warning. "You better pay attention to what is happening. God is coming and you better get ready!"

Today we hear from two messengers who up the ante. Malachi has the last words as the last prophet in the Old Testament. The name "Malachi" literally means "my messenger." Malachi is a whistleblower who condemns the priests and religious officials for their abuse of power and their corruption of worship. He condemns the people for their complacency and complaints against God. In fact, he says they are so out of touch with God and so ignorant of their covenant relationship with God that they think evil is good. He says they are so lazy in their faith that they don't even recognize that they are lazy in their faith.

They are totally indifferent to God and in their indifference they call out, "Where is God and where is God's justice?"

Malachi's response is this: "You want to see God, well hold onto your hats because God is coming and nothing will be the same again! Be careful what you ask for!"

The season of Advent reminds us that something is about to happen in God's world. *"There is a terrible, hopeful newness about life: terrible because it promises to overthrow all our old, comfortable, sinful ways. Hopeful for the very same reasons."* (1)

Leave it to Malachi to tell us how God will prepare us- God will cleanse us- with fire and soap! Doesn't sound very Christmassy, does it? The old prophet suggests that before God arrives we need a bath. He suggests that our souls need a shower before we are ready to meet God. He tells of a messenger who will come, not with

brightly wrapped packages and sweet smelling soap from Bath and Body Works, but with a torch in one hand and a caustic detergent in the other.

He comes to boil off the impurities in our souls and apply a stiff scrub brush to our spirits to prepare us for the coming Holy One. (I'd like to see those Christmas tree ornaments!)

Maybe this isn't such a bad image to contemplate in an age where we are constantly reminded to wash our hands to stave off the flu and a variety of other germs and maladies. Malachi knows that life is messy. And he knows that we need to get our act together so we can be ready to welcome God without distractions. He knows it won't be easy and may even be painful but it is necessary and it sure will be worth it!

There was another messenger from God who also demanded that the people come clean before the arrival of God. He was the one who dunked them in the river so as the water washed their skin clean, their sins were also washed away with prayers of repentance.

What would Advent be without John the Baptist? (Maybe a little quieter.) I am still waiting to see a figure of him in a nativity scene. He is always among the first of our Advent messengers.

He is the one who introduces Jesus in all four of the Gospels in the New Testament. John is the one who gets to make the grand announcement that God's Messiah is on his way. And he makes that announcement with some harsh words. But the harsh words were necessary because he lived in harsh times.

Luke introduces the time of John with a history lesson to let us know just how harsh the times were. He lists no less than seven political and religious rulers of the day. He does this to anchor the story of God's salvation history into the real, tangible history of the world. John and Jesus are not some mythological characters. They existed in an actual time and place. Here is how Professor James Kay describes this introduction. *"In the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius's reign as emperor when Pilate was the governor up in Jerusalem and the Herod boys were down in Galilee, running things with their usual un-brotherly squabbling. Lysansias was stuck in Abilene. Annas and Caiaphas were in their appointed places providing religious cement for Rome's social engineers.*

*Luke seems to be saying that when the Word of God came it **really** came. It came all the way down into **this** world; into the world of political, economic, and religious power, the world of the Caesars. (3)*

And when it came it didn't come to those in power. It didn't come to Rome or even to Jerusalem. It didn't come to the Temple or the thrones of privilege. It didn't come to the one percent. The Word of God came to one in the wilderness. One who represented the oppressed and beaten down people of Israel. It came to those who had no power, no hope.

A few decades ago preacher Gardner Taylor gave us this rendition. *"Dwight D. Eisenhower being president of the United States and John Patterson the governor of Alabama, J. Edgar Hoover the omnipotent autocrat of the FBI, Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale, the high priests of middle America, the word of God came to Martin Luther King in the wilderness of America."*

Brings the message a little closer to home, doesn't it? At least for those of us old enough to remember those names.

Because John was speaking during such a harsh time, you would think the message might be a bit gentler, perhaps something to console the people and bring them comfort. You would think.

*"You brood of snakes! What do you think you are doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snake skins is going to deflect God's judgment? It's your life that must change, not your skin!" (The MESSAGE)*

Do you think John caught their attention? He confronts them and he confronts us and he demands a response. *"The Messiah is coming! What are you going to do about it?"* John's call is for repentance- turn around, change your mind, turn back to God. John demands that the people examine their lives, their motives, their priorities, their faith, their values. Then he invites them into the river to come clean. John wasn't interested in a squirt of hand sanitizer. He demanded nothing less than full immersion, a total cleansing, head to toe.

If these two Advent messengers don't make us feel uncomfortable then we are not paying attention. Their whole purpose is to shake up the status quo; to wake us from slumber and shake the drowsy complacency from our souls. Their purpose is to change our attitudes and our behavior. We know the crowd gathered around John in the wilderness heard his message because they cried out, "What should we do?"

And what does John say? Does he send them to the temple to pray? Does he give them instructions on religious ritual and sacrifice? Does he instruct them to go home and meditate on the words of scripture? No he doesn't. He gives them something to do for someone else. He instructs them in the ways of fairness and justice. "If you have two coats give one to someone who has none. If you have

plenty of food share with one who is hungry." John made it clear that repentance is seen in how we live our lives. If we truly turn back to God then our lives will bear the fruits of generosity, unselfishness, and justice.

God doesn't just expect us to **believe** a certain way, God expects us to **behave** in a certain way.

John says, "Just because you live in misery doesn't mean you treat others miserably." He brings a message of social justice that will be carried throughout Luke's Gospel. The coming of God's reign will require radical change- nothing will be left the same- starting with us. The world is not as God intends for it to be and the change is coming soon.

So if you want to meet the Messiah, according to Malachi and John, you better get on board. The first thing you do is get clean yourself and then you reach out to others. You can't accept this new world and then just go back to business as usual.

Pastor William Lamar writes, "*To bypass John is to bypass God. John's baptism of repentance is not simply a call for piety and morality. It is nothing short of the labor pains preceding the inauguration of God's reign.*"

*John is calling for the world to change- spiritually, economically, politically, and socially- in anticipation of the advent of the Messiah. John is a direct threat to imperial theology and power. Enlightened spiritual gurus who transform the spirit and leave the social order uninterrupted don't get beheaded by the state.*

*Isaiah's poetry is cited to cast the vision, '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.' This is not a private matter. The earth will never be the same. Humanity will never be the same."*

There is a reason God's messengers aren't Tinker Bell and Glinda, the Good Witch of the West. There is a reason God's Advent messengers delivered hard words of good news. We, like our biblical counterparts, are so entrenched in the world in which we live that it is sometimes difficult to get our attention.

We get so caught up in the values, privilege, and priorities of our culture that we forget that we are called to **be** different and to **make** a difference.

Malachi and John are sent to us on this Second Sunday of Advent to grab our attention and to turn us in God's direction. They speak hard words of good news because so much is at stake. God sends them to us out of deep love and mercy.

God's words are not words of judgement and failure but rather words of forgiveness and hope.

If we wish to approach the cradle of Christmas;

If we wish to greet the infant Jesus;

If we wish to celebrate the coming of God's reign we first have to get our souls scrubbed clean, we have to be open to the refiner's fire and the cleansing soap. If you remember nothing else, remember this:

**"If we want to hold the baby, we must first wash our hands."** (4) Amen.

*End Notes:*

- *TEXTS FOR PREACHING: A LECTIONARY COMMENTARY BASED ON THE NRSV- YEAR C*, Eds. Cousar, Gaventa, McCann, Newsome. Westminster John Know Press. 1994. P. 10.
- *A TESTAMENT TO FREEDOM: THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER*, eds. Kelly and Nelson, Harper San Francisco, 1995. Pp. 185-186.
- "Ready for Prime Time," a sermon by James F. Kay, *The Christian Century*, 1997.
- "Fire and Soap," a sermon by Scott Black Johnston. Dec. 10, 2006, Fifth Ave Presbyterian Church, NY.