

Malachi 3: 1-4
Luke 3: 1-6
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
December 6, 2015
Second Sunday of Advent

On Christmas Eve we will hear the wonderful announcement of the angels to the shepherds on the hillsides of Bethlehem: "Be not afraid! For behold! I bring to you good news of a great joy which shall be to all people." Well may we pass over the first announcement: "Be not afraid"; for on Christmas Eve only joy seems to be on the horizon. Yet if we are truly to hear and respond joyfully to this good news we have work to do. We have to address what it is that causes us to be afraid and to shrink before the revealing of God to humanity.

To help us with our task we hear the words of the prophet Malachi. Malachi preaches in the era before the exile of Israel and Judah and before the destruction of Jerusalem. The operation of the Temple is going smoothly. The sacrifices are being done and the priests seem to be doing their job. Yet all is not well. Malachi detects a shift in the spiritual center of the Temple rituals. They seem to have lost contact with the reason God commanded them to be done. It seems that the operation of the Temple has taken on a life of its own. The priests are no longer the honored few who by their devotion to God and the purity of their lives are permitted to offer these sacrifices on behalf of God's people. They have become upper management types in a vast religious organization who have no problem becoming wealthy in their positions as intermediaries between God and God's people. As a result Malachi sees a growing skepticism and apathy among the people. Malachi sees moral decline and growing injustice toward the poor. He hears with increasing frequency the belief that if there is a God he is not present.

It is a dynamic in human beings that when we feel abandoned; when we feel no one is watching over us; and when we see others prospering while we suffer, we begin to take life into our own hands. We are afraid that if those we expect to protect us are no longer doing so then we need to look after ourselves without reference to our fellow humans. When this happens it is a sign of the breaking up of human community. When communities begin acting out of fear then real oppression takes place as we seek to identify those we believe are dangerous. It becomes perfectly logical to isolate groups of people and even to kill.

All of this dangerous behavior, according to the Bible is the outcome of deep seated fear. Where there is fear there is an incomplete relationship with God.

Unlike many who think that, if only we pass another law or increase the punishment for certain anti-social behavior we will deter this dissolution of human community, Malachi knows that human beings alone cannot right the wrongs. God alone can restore community. God alone can right injustice. When people demand of Malachi, "Where is God in the midst of all the violence and corruption?", God through Malachi, as he does through all the prophets asks, "Where are you?"

This the consistent message of the prophets: until we return wholeheartedly to the worship and dependence on God alone there will always be violence, injustice and greed. As the great jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes observed, we cannot legislate away immorality. We can contain it and punish it. We can reward good behavior and discourage bad behavior but human laws cannot change human nature. We cannot legislate away original sin. Only God can do that.

And so Malachi announces that God has taken the initiative to restore Israel and Judah to himself.

Look! I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed he is coming, says the Lord of Hosts.

Good news! God is sending a messenger who will make it all better, right?

But who can endure the day of his coming? (Oops!) For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. *Then (and only then)* the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in days of old and as in former years.

God through Malachi goes on to say that even then all will not be well for everybody.

For when the messenger has done his work, the Lord will draw near to complete the refining process.

Generations later a man named John, son of Zechariah, appeared on the scene in the wilderness of Judah with the message that the time had come. The way must be made to prepare the way of the Lord. Clearly, Luke and the larger Christian community identified John the Baptist as the messenger announced by the prophets.

Friends, this morning I propose that the words of Malachi and John the Baptist are addressed to you and me. They are as relevant today as they were long ago. Who of us have not been shaken to the bone by the acts of chaotic violence which seem to be proliferating around the world and in our own country? Who has not wondering what is happening? Who of us is not looking for some group or circumstance to blame. Who of us does not yearn for some solution that will take the fear away so that we will safe in our communities again? In addition, who us has not felt that whatever we do does not take the evil away; indeed, like the amusement park game "whack-a-mole" we knock one mole back into the hole and another

pops up? How do we be faithful and alive to the living presence of God? How do we be people of hope and even joy?

I believe that the first is to recognize that we are included in the people God means to refine. There is no one so pure that we do not require God's refining fire. Yet the prospect of being subject to that kind of burning away all that is unsightly to God is a fearful thought. Forty years ago a dentist told me I needed a root canal. I thanked him and didn't go to another dentist after MJ and I were married. When I finally went it turned out I didn't need a root canal; but because I had avoided the dentist my teeth and gums were not a pretty sight.

The messenger is coming! God is coming! Jesus is coming! But who can endure his coming? After all, when he comes it will not be to give his blessing for everything. He will want to cleanse us from all that separates us from complete union with him. It will probably be less pleasant than a root canal. But what shall we do? Shall we hide in fear? Shall we present ourselves as better than we are? Shall we react defensively when we receive feedback that is not 100% positive? Shall we seek to feel better about ourselves because our sins are not as bad as others? That certainly is an option we can and to take. Yet it represents a response of fear. As John the evangelist writes: "Fear has to do with fear of punishment."

Yet as Advent people we believe that the One who is to come *loves us!* Whatever refining he will want to do in us will be because he loves us. Jesus has already overcome the sins of the world. He wants us to overcome as well. He wants us to so yearn for the freedom from our hurtful and broken behavior that we will go to any length to receive our deliverance. Jesus wants us to love him more than we are afraid of our sins: because, as John says, "Perfect love casts out fear."

So it is that the season of Advent calls us to seek first Christ's kingdom—for ourselves and for others. Advent reminds us the vastness and beauty of the Kingdom of God is worth setting aside everything that holds us back. As a result we develop a love so great that no sacrifice is too big and the thought of refining no longer inspires fear but the anticipation of true spiritual freedom. Amen.