

2nd Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.8.24

Malachi 3:1-4

See, 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. 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 like fullers' 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 the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:1-6

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 Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 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. 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.'" (286)

I had an adult friend as a kid, Suzette. A kindergarten teacher who married into the family of longtime friends of my family, she would attend church where I did and she took a liking to my sister and me. She would stay with us whenever my parents went away, which wasn't often, a couple times a year. She hired me, when I was twelve years old, to be an assistant in her kindergarten's summer program, my first job.

One day, when I was in junior high, I hurt her feelings. She often joked about her nose, which she thought was big and had a funny bend in it. Of Italian heritage, she had a beautiful face and wavy hair, high cheekbones and a Roman nose, I realize in retrospect.

One Sunday, a friend who'd slept over at my house came to church with me the next day, and at coffee hour I introduced her to Suzette. I mentioned Suzette's nose, trying to join the joke she had on herself.

She told me later it had hurt her feelings.

I was devastated and ashamed: the last thing I'd want to do was to hurt Suzette.

That terrible feeling: I figure that's the feeling of redemption, a process that you undergo, not a prize you're awarded, or not. When you see what you've done, when someone calls your attention to something hurtful, or, on a different scale, something destructive, and you actually attend to it, you actually look at what you've done: I figure that's what redemption feels like.

A refiner's fire. A fuller's soap. Malachi wasn't taking things easy, Malachi, a name that means messenger. The latest written book of prophecy, Malachi wasn't the name of this prophet but the job of the prophet, any prophet. It's mostly agreed we don't know who the writer was, though tradition will imagine him as Ezra, who lived and led late in the exile, early in the process of return. He also didn't take things easy. His aim was to return the chosen people to their promised land, the land from which they'd been deported when Babylon came crashing in, back in 586—to return the chosen people and only the chosen people.

Exile in Babylon had been bad, of course—and also not so bad. The people were deported from their land and separated from one another and less able to practice their sacred practices than they were when the Temple stood, and the priesthood served. But they were also able to make livelihoods for themselves in Babylon, to marry and to have children, eventually even grandchildren. The exile lasted 50 years, a long enough time to settle in and build a life.

Which some people did, did better than others. It might have depended how insistent you were on the old way or how open to change you were for something new.

The time of return, in 536, was a blessing, and a heartbreak.

Babylon had now fallen to Persia, one more empire in a long succession of empires; and Persia was indifferent to the people Judea and Israel. This made them now free to return to the land of Canaan, to rebuild there, which they would do so under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, Ezra who would oversee the return to cultic practice and Nehemiah who would oversee the building of the city and the Temple.

The thing is, Gentiles weren't allowed to join. Any marriages that had formed in Babylon between Jew and Gentile had to stay behind. Any children begotten in those marriages had to stay behind.

The scene in the book of Ezra when he is rededicating the Temple, reading a long blessing that would reactivate their lives once again as a people apart: there's testimony of tears flowing on the scene. People wept and wailed, as remembered in this book. And it's often taken as desperate joy on display. It's often assumed that the people were overcome with relief and reassurance, to be able to return home. I've often wondered whether those tears were also heartbreak of what was required to be left behind, perhaps even more so anguish that what blessing time in Babylon had brought—so surprising! who'd have thought?—now came as a new exile, people newly separated from those whom they'd come to love, those whom they were forbidden to love.

Human relationships are remarkably resilient—and not infrequently they are in violation of propriety, in violation even of the law.

It's worth remembering that the book of Ruth comes to us from this very same time.

Ruth, you might recall, was herself a Gentile, the wife of a man who'd fled famine in the land, who went to a foreign land with his mother and his brother where at least there was promise of food. He took a wife there, as did his brother, but then he died there, as did his brother. So, the two women who'd become their wives in this foreign land: one of them returned to her family of origin and the other stayed with Naomi, the mother of the lost sons. And then, when the famine had past and life was secure once again in the land, Naomi returned to her people, to her promised land, and Ruth went with her. Though a Gentile, though a foreigner raised to worship foreign gods, Ruth clung to Naomi, even amidst Naomi's return: Ruth, the very sort of person Ezra would have excluded.

One book of the Bible trolling another.

It's worth remembering also that Ruth is called out in the genealogy of Jesus. The gospel of Matthew lists the forbears from whom Jesus came. A long list, it includes Ruth, this presence of impurity among an otherwise impeccable line.

Or was it that, an impurity?

Really, what did Matthew intend in including *her* here?

The Bible is more of a conversation, even an argument, than we might usually think—an argument that God seems to be having with himself. “Who’s in? Who’s out? And how do you know? What makes it so?”

That said, Malachi’s insistence that something here needs purifying, needs the harsh work of a fuller’s soap: I wouldn’t argue with that.

So, 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 Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. Here would come one to purify, or one to prepare the way for purification.

For what it’s worth, this introduction seems eager to insist that this all really happened. Grounding the story he’s about to tell, grounding it in all these historically real and undeniable rulers, our writer is about to tell us a story that is by any measure out of this world and yet he wants us to understand it took place very much in this world.

Our gospel writer: tradition's called him Luke. This, likely to call on the man, Luke, whom the Apostle Paul mentioned in two of his letters for being a companion and important in his ministry. But this gospel narrative was written long after Paul's ministry, probably forty or fifty years after, meaning the writer of this gospel might have taken that as a pen name to indicate what tradition he was writing for, what name and persona he was writing as—but it probably wasn't him.

Nonetheless, as we follow his narrative throughout this coming church year, I'll refer to him as Luke—because of course our writer *had* a name, and we don't know what it was, and we have to call him something as we consider not only his book but also his intention and perspective as a writer, so why not go with the name that corresponds with the book? I'm a preacher, not a scholar, so I operate with some poetic license, and you're here, not to listen to me defend a dissertation, but to remember that God is at work in the world and, for this, to be renewed in hope. We're allowed a little art in our speech.

But just a little—because, as it happens, Luke wants us to understand, this really happened, a story that is to be bound by fact, within the bounds of history and historicity, though also utterly breaking those bounds for breaking into those bounds. This thing to which he was about to testify, this event of God arriving amidst history, first in Jesus, then in the Holy Spirit and, by this, in the church, really happened.

It all really happened!

In this way, Christianity is a departure from other mythological systems, their founding narratives, and the practices they resulted in. Prior to the faith claims of the church in the 1st century, most other faith claims we know of found their origins in mythic time or in “time out of mind,” as one philosopher of religion calls it. And it makes a difference, if you ask me. It makes a difference that God isn't just one of a pantheon of gods, not to mention demigods and spirits, a whole community above that might bear resemblance to this one below but is more powerful or beautiful or horrible or eternal. If God is rather one, a unity powerfully transcendent while also utterly imminent, joining us in our humanity to live amidst the world, entering history and interacting with historical players by which changing history's course, then we're implicated in the playing out of things in a different way, and so is God.

Since this all really happened, we're all somewhat responsible for what happens next.

Which doesn't make things clear, mind you. That this new revelation, this new covenant, has its grounding in the world and wraps up into its aims the stuff of the world, the stuff of life and of our lives: this doesn't clear things up. It implies that we're to live into this revelation, that

we're to orient our lives around its lived truth, but it doesn't make clear as to how. Whether we are to retreat from the world or embed ourselves in the world, its ways and machinations of power and principalities; whether we are to have private lives of perfect piety while our public selves go along to get along; whether we are to aim to change the world or to trust that the world will change by our living amidst it in this new faith; whether we are to pay our tax to Caesar and to pay our homage to the king and to pay our vote to the lesser of two evils or are to try to take it all over in some act of righteous redeeming of the times or to insist on something altogether more pure: it makes none of this clear. In fact, there is hardly a more unsolvable puzzle than the one the Apostle Paul lays out for himself and others who would follow his lead: how to be in the world but not of the world.

All it makes clear is that so it shall be, that even in the time when Biden is president and Trump is president-elect, when Healy is governor and Neal is the representative and Godwin is the conference minister, the word of the Lord will come to the world, in messengers all over the place. Yes, even now, we are to live into this puzzle, to live as if Christ really happened and the Holy Spirit continues to happen, amidst the grand trends of history and the quietist tendencies of all our most hidden away hearts and everything in between.

And for all the ways it will yet go wrong, there is redemption, the burning off of error as if by a refiner's fire, the burning out of impurity and unrighteousness and sin as if by that so acidic fuller's soap.

I am a universalist. I believe in the universal saving of God as regards all creation. There is no eternal punishment. There is no eternal torment. If there is "hell," some supernatural realm of the absence of God, then it is altogether empty, emptied out where made all the more full God's reign of healing love and saving grace.

But even that's a big "if" because much hell's imagery, at least as it arrives in current imagining, terrifying as it is so to terrorize as it does, I think stems from a failure to understand the metaphor of fire made here, a failure to understand what a refiner's fire is to do. This isn't a punishing fire, but a purifying one. Silver doesn't undergo such a process in order to suffer torment but in order to be made ever better silver.

I am universalist, but that doesn't mean God regards the world and all that is herein to sum it up thus: "Whatever. It's all good." Because, of course, it's not all good. Indeed, much of it is very not-good.

Right? Don't you think?

So, the question of redemption is an important one, even a scandalous one. For how can it be that even the worst of history's players can come to know the loving embrace of God?

How, but only hardly. Redemption isn't an easy process, not as I imagine it. But it isn't painful for the sake of pain. It is painful only to the degree that we cling to evil, that we defend what we've done because of the weight of our shame or the horror of what there is to see, the fear of seeing that horror as our own to admit.

And it's something done in time, even from day to day: you hurt someone's feelings, they point it out, and you see and you admit and you make it right. And it's something done when you're out of time, when God alone reigns as sovereign and you are but a subject of God's redeeming love. What you've done, what you've been a party to, what you've acquiesced to or failed to intervene in or compromised on as a lesser of many evils: all of it! For who can stand in the day of the Lord? Who is un-besmirched in the time of redemption?

But see, this isn't about us. It is about God, God who is coming, and not as a threat but as a promise, all flesh to see and rejoice in salvation.

Thanks be to God.