

2nd Sunday of Advent

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6; Philippians 1:3-11.

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”.

One cannot read this passage in scripture without hearing those words so dramatically and powerfully sung in Handel’s “Messiah”. In a most profound sense, this passage is meant more to be sung than to be read!

But it is important to move behind the beauty and the poetic power of these words to their meaning. For it is true that what Malachi is prophesying lends itself magnificently to its inevitable use by the early Christians as they seek to connect the ministries of John the Baptist and of Jesus with the Hebrew prophecies of the forerunner and the Messiah.

There is an innate ambiguity in this scripture because the word “messenger” is used to refer to two distinct people. It is possible to read it as one person. But to do so makes the passage itself internally inconsistent as well as thoroughly confusing.

The two people foretold in this passage are “my (i.e., God’s) messenger” and “the messenger of the covenant”. Malachi tells us that “my messenger” is one chosen by God to “prepare the way before (God)” who “will suddenly come to his temple”. What is behind this statement is the completion of a prophecy earlier enunciated by Ezekiel.

In Ezekiel 8-10, that prophet describes God’s judgment coming upon Jerusalem and its Temple. The Temple is the symbol of God’s presence “tabernacling” among His people. Ezekiel describes the glory of God (the “Shekinah”) lifting from off the Temple where it had rested since Solomon had consecrated it. In majestic writing, Ezekiel describes God’s glory moving away from the Temple toward the east, clearing the walls of the city and then moving away from the city to disappear over the eastern mountains surrounding the city (Ezek. 10:1-22). Across that city is then written the curse, “Ichabod” (“the glory has departed”).

Ezekiel later envisions a day when God’s glory will return to a newly consecrated Jerusalem and Temple (Ezek. 47-48). But it is in Malachi that this later prophet completes Ezekiel’s vision by declaring that “the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple”. God is returning, for God is once again on the move!

But how do we know that God is on the move? We know that God is acting because God sends “my messenger” before Him to declare that God is returning to Jerusalem (it was the practice in the ancient Near East for a king to send a messenger ahead of him to announce that the king was on the move and would soon arrive). Of course, the early Christians identified “my messenger” with John the Baptist who came proclaiming, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:2, 4-8; cf. Matt. 3:7-12; Luke 3:1-20; John 1:19-28).

But Malachi tells us that there is a second person; he is “the messenger of the covenant” (vs. 1b). He is like a refiner’s fire and fullers’ soap, exposing the oppressive injustice, economic exploitation and the lust for domination systemic to Israel’s elite and even of the people of Israel. That “messenger of the covenant” will burn away the nation’s dross and wash away the nation’s sins, so that they are prepared for the coming of God Himself “to his temple” (vss. 2b-3).

It is this second messenger who will “purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness” (v. 3). What will be needed, if there is to be any future for Israel, is that their political, economic and religious leadership (“the descendants of Levi”) will have to undergo conversion – rebirth – a total turning around in their priorities and values and objectives both for themselves and for their nation. They will have to eschew their own political ambitions, lust for power and wealth, and the cloaking of their ambitions in religious language (in order to make such ambitions acceptable), all of which lead inevitably to political oppression, economic exploitation and domination of the people. They will have to replace these priorities for new values of justice, equitable sharing of wealth and authentic relationship with God and all the people of Israel. But that can’t happen unless and until there is profound purification that must happen both to these leaders and to Israel itself. Such purification is likened to the process of refining metal – burning off the dross and preserving the refined metal (cf. Jer. 9:7; Zech. 13:9).

But such purification won’t happen except by the intervention of “the messenger of the covenant” – the One who calls the powers to embrace God’s intentions for their society, and convinces the people to embrace those intentions. And such purification won’t happen unless this messenger of the covenant is offered on behalf of the people. Then, and only then, “the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years” (v. 4).

Who is this “messenger of the covenant”? The church has declared from its very origins that this “messenger” is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, who became the perfect sacrifice that made it possible for both humanity and society to be redeemed.

Luke 1:68-79 is the “psalm” for the Second Sunday in Advent, even though it does not appear in the Psalter. It is the magnificent hymn of the father of John the Baptizer, Zechariah, on the occasion of the birth of John.

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke

through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:68-79).

Malachi 3:1-4 is being enacted right before our eyes, Zechariah is declaring! This psalm celebrates both the birth of “my messenger” and “the messenger of the covenant”! Zechariah’s emphasis upon “my messenger” is in the final four verses (vss. 76-79), while his celebration of “the messenger of the covenant” is the focus of verses 68-75.

Although one would think that Zechariah would start with his son (John the Baptizer), instead he begins with Jesus. The coming of John was for the purpose of announcing God’s coming action through Jesus, and therefore it is Jesus who is the center of Zechariah’s prophecy, not his son! It was not about John!

Zechariah’s Song has become one of the standard liturgies of the church, called “*The Benedictus*” (because it begins, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel”). The hymn is set in a psalm mode which, by its very nature, blesses and glorifies God. It is a commentary of the extraordinary events that have taken place over these few months – the announcement that God is on the move in the miraculous conceptions that have occurred in both Elizabeth and Mary, the birth of Zechariah’s son who is destined to be a great prophet of God and forerunner (and foreteller) of the coming of God’s “messenger of the covenant”, and the weaving of both John’s story and Jesus’ story into one tapestry of redemption. Zechariah begins with that tapestry of redemption.

God’s action is “to raise up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David” (vs. 69). That was the principle objective of God’s amazing action over the previous months. John is simply a key player in the acting of God’s will, but he is not that savior. The coming of that person who would liberate God’s people around the world was prophesied by God’s prophets over hundreds of years (vs. 70). The salvation that person will accomplish is comprehensive in its scope. It would be for humanity’s “redemption” (vs. 68). But it would also be so that “we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” (vs. 71). It would “show mercy” upon us but would also return God’s people to “(Abraham’s) holy covenant (with God)” (vs. 72), so that Israel, “being rescued from the hands of (its) enemies” will be able to live as a nation “in holiness and righteousness before (God) all our days” (vs. 73). The emphasis in Zechariah’s psalm of both individual and corporate salvation, of both spiritual redemption and political and economic liberation is both marked and obvious! To Luke, salvation was far more than the redeeming of souls!

And what is John's role in all this? "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord (i.e., Jesus) to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people through the forgiveness of their sins" (vss. 76-77). Whereas Jesus is the Son of God Most High (vv. 32, 35), John is to be the Prophet of God Most High! His task is a single task: "to prepare the way for Jesus" (vs. 76b). And John is to "prepare the way for Jesus" through two actions. First, he is to announce the coming of Jesus, to center the focus on "the messenger of the covenant" and not on "my messenger" and therefore, to create a sense of eager anticipation among God's people. Second, he is to prepare people to be open and ready to receive the message, ministry and call to them by Jesus by the act of "the forgiveness of their sins" (vs. 77c). The ritual of water baptism was to be the means John would use to enable God's people to become reflective of their own greed, lust for power and compulsion to dominate and control that they would repent of such sin and thus become most receptive to the work that Jesus was to accomplish as "the messenger of the covenant". If the people were indeed open and receptive enough, Jesus would then be able to "give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death and to guide their feet into the way of shalom" (vs. 79)! For that "shalom community" awaiting those willing to be so guided would be a nation and a people committed to the building of their life together as a community of justice, equitable distribution of wealth, the elimination of poverty and lives lived knitted together in God – the very definition of the Hebrew word, "shalom"!

Luke 3:1-6 begins, "In the fifteenth year 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" (3:1-2).

What Malachi the Prophet anticipated and what Zechariah celebrated was then actually acted out 35 years later. This beginning of the story of the ministry of the adult Jesus which Luke composed is a significant beginning. First, in its introduction of both John and Jesus as prophets (but Jesus as being more than a prophet), it is intentionally following the style for the beginning of the major prophetic works of Israel (e.g., "The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" [Isa. 1:1]; "The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiyah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of King Josiah, son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign" [Jer. 1:1-2]; "On the fifth day of the month, in the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin, the word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi" [Ezek. 1:2-3]; "The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of King Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah" [Micah 1:1]; "The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake" [Amos 1:1]).

Second, the story of Luke (following its preface narratives of Jesus' birth and childhood) begins by fixing in temporal time the events about which he is writing. This story of Jesus' ministry, teachings, miracles, betrayal, execution and resurrection are not fairy tales beginning "Once upon a time". Instead, Luke is reporting sacred history that is anchored in secular history. The

story he is about to tell you began in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius, emperor of Rome, when others sat upon provisional thrones and Caiaphas was Israel's high priest. It began in 28 A.D.

But third, the naming of the political and religious leaders of Rome, Judah and the surrounding states are named for another far more important reason. They are named in order to contrast the powers of the systems of Jesus' day and the power of God as personified in John the Baptist and (later) Jesus of Nazareth. They are named in order to set at the very beginning of Luke's story the protagonists who will dominate the story. For it will be Jesus and his disciples, John the Baptist and those who follow him over against the "powers that be" of Rome and the Jewish elite, symbolized in Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Annas and Caiaphas.

The contrast between Jesus and John, and those whom Luke names in his list of the "powers that be" is significant. Every one of those powers in opposition to Jesus and John already is or will soon be discredited in their performance of the trust invested in them by the people. Tiberius, emperor of Rome, was mentally ill, living in isolation in his palace, sexually preying on and victimizing young boys and arbitrarily putting hundreds of people to death. Pontius Pilate, who was procurator of Judea from 26-37 CE, had a career marked by frequent executions with either a sham of a trial or no trial (Jesus' trial as reported by Luke was an example of Pilate's bloodthirstiness), bribes, robberies, and an amazing enjoyment of intentionally offending the Jews. Herod Antipas, king of Galilee and Perea (4 BCE – 39 CE) squandered money, seduced his brother Philip's wife and married her, was obsequious in his loyalty to Rome, repeatedly offended Jewish religious practices, and lived a profligate life. Philip, tetrarch of Trachonitis (4 BCE - 34 CE) was thoroughly Hellenized and Romanized, completely rejecting his Jewish faith and practice.

Finally, it is particularly significant that Luke listed Annas and Caiaphas as the "high priesthood", because Annas was not the high priest in 27 CE. Annas was the former high priest (6-15 CE), while Caiaphas was the present high priest (18 – 36 CE). That they were listed together by Luke as the current high priests is significant, because Annas had built his position into probably the most powerful Jewish high priest of all time. It was under his rule that the religious hierarchy of Judea had been built into the primary Jewish aristocracy that combined in this single group of the religious leaders of Israel (the priests, Sadducees and Pharisees) the political, economic and religious power of Israel that ruled Judea and even much of Galilee with Rome. In fact, Annas had amassed such personal power in his office as high priest that Rome had perceived him as a threat and consequently replaced him in 18 CE with his son, Caiaphas. But rather than resulting in a redistribution of priestly power, Rome's appointment of Caiaphas had only created a cabal of power in which the two men worked hand-in-glove to dominate Israelite politics, economics and religion.

These, then, are to be the protagonists that will play out the struggle over against Jesus ("the messenger of the covenant") and John the Baptist ("my messenger") for the political, economic and spiritual soul of Israel. And Luke presents that impending struggle in a most unique way.

Luke first names the power elite of Rome and Israel who are seeking to maintain a society that exists for their favor, a society of political oppression, economic exploitation and religious

control that is designed to dominate the people in every way. These protagonists all live in the midst of wealth and power, in the palaces of Rome, Jerusalem, and in Herod's and Philip's respective courts. Then Luke writes, "the word of God came to John son of Zebedee in the wilderness" (3:2b).

God's work to return Israel (or to create a new Israel) to God's intentions for it and all society begins in the wilderness. The shalom community of political justice, equitable distribution of wealth eliminating poverty and all the people and leaders living in loving and redemptive relationship with each other and with God starts in the desert. And why does it start in the desert? Because it is always in the desert that God meets with and transforms God's people!

It was in the wilderness that Moses met God at a burning bush. It was into the wilderness that the escaped slaves from Egypt fled, and where they also met with God at Mount Sinai and were formed into the nation of Israel. It was in the wilderness that Israel received the Law that taught them God's intentions for society – the kind of world God wanted Israel to create. It was into the wilderness that Israel's great prophets fled in order to be emboldened for their mission in the world. It would be out of the wilderness that Israel's remnant people would return from Babylonian exile. And it would be in the wilderness that Jesus of Nazareth would wrestle with the temptations of building God's kingdom the world's (and Satan's) way. John the Baptist was to be found, not in the palaces of emperors, kings or high priests, but in the wilderness! For it was in the wilderness that Israel had traditionally met God and had been shaped by God into the nation that God intended them to be!

Thus, Luke tells us that John the Baptist began his ministry in the wilderness. And he did so by "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (3:3). John called on the people of Israel to repent of their acceptance of life lived under political oppression, economic exploitation and religious domination, and to symbolize that repentance through being baptized.

The Law is clear, John taught, what God intends for our life together as God's people. Is it not "to do justice, to love each other tenderly, and to walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8)? But, instead, what have we done with God's call to us to be that kind of people? We have accepted a political, economic and religious order (symbolized by our cooperation with the Jewish clergy aristocracy) that uses the Law to build its own power and wealth, and which dominates us. And we have ended up aping those systems by oppressing, exploiting and seeking to dominate each other. Thus, John called on the Israelite people to repent of their willingness to seduce and to be seduced by the systems of this world. And he called on them to symbolize their repentance by being baptized.

It is important to understand that baptism was perceived as an insult to the Jews! The rite John proposed that Israel observe as an indication of their repentance was a rite that was unacceptable to Jewish people. Baptism – that is, the ritualistic and public submersion of a person into a body of water – was a ceremonial act used only for Gentiles. A Gentile was baptized if that Gentile decided to convert to Judaism. Submerging him publicly into water symbolized the "washing away" of his former pagan, Gentile defilement, and his being cleansed so that he might become a Jew. Only Gentiles were baptized. What was unacceptable and even shocking in John's call for

Jews to be baptized was the Jews' perception that this was a rite fit only for Gentiles.¹ And now, they were being asked by John to be as Gentiles through admitting publicly that they had rejected God's intentions for themselves and their nation, were now publicly repenting, and were committing themselves to truly become "Jews" (as God would define it) for the first time (Mt. 3:6; Mark 1:4)!

It is amazing that any Jew would respond to John's call to be baptized. But they did respond. By the scores and hundreds and perhaps even by thousands, they responded to John's call to be baptized and to repent! And Jesus was among them!

What are the Jews to do once they have been baptized, and publicly confess that they are now going to live their lives submitting to God's call to them, to begin practicing God's shalom community of justice, sharing of wealth and commitment to one another and God, to refuse to be seduced any longer by Israel's and Rome's systems seeking control over them, and to become a part of the restored people of God? Luke does not tell us in today's Gospel lesson, but he does later on in Luke 3:7-18. Through the words of John himself, it is clear that those baptized by him go forth to build God's new community in Israel – a community of justice, wealth-sharing, the elimination of poverty and the building of a relational culture.

Luke now brings this Gospel lesson to a close by declaring, "John 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", and then quotes Isaiah 40:3-5. Why would Luke interrupt his story about John by examining this Old Testament prophecy?

In reality, Luke's inclusion of Isaiah 40:3-5 is not an interruption to the story he is telling. Rather, it is the apex of that story – the biblical justification of the story that has preceded it. Isaiah 40:3-5 tells us that one will come out of the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord (the "Lord", Luke soon makes clear, is Jesus and not Yahweh). The task of the messenger and of the people, preparing for the "Lord", is to make paths straight, valleys filled, mountains lowered, crooked ways made straight, rough places made smooth. In other words, we are to straighten out the world in which we live – its' political, economic, social and spiritual dimensions as well as its individuals. We are to prepare for the coming of the Lord. And when he comes, and when we embrace his vision for the world and the power of his intervention for us, then "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" – the world, in real time, existing as God intends it to exist!

Thus, what Luke is doing is closing this passage the way he opened it. He began it by grounding the work of John the Baptist in "real time" – in the realities of Roman-occupied Israel. He has presented a powerful story of how God's intervention in that "real time" has not come from "the principalities and powers" but from an ordinary man like John who calls Israel back to its meeting place with God in the wilderness where they repent of their acquiescence and seduction by the systems, their recommitment to God and God's kingdom and their return to everyday life

¹One might argue that baptism was the entrance ritual into the Qumran community, and therefore must have been acceptable to the Jews of Jesus' day. But that baptism was an insult to Jews is precisely the significance of it being used by the Qumran community, because it meant humbling and demeaning yourself in order to make this public commitment. Cf., R.C. Sproul, *The Reformation Study Bible* (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), p. 1459, commentary on Luke 3:3, Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 164-168.

to reform it. And all of the people's response to John is simply foretaste of the greater mission and the greater response that will come through the coming of "the messenger of the covenant", Jesus of Nazareth (who is yet to be announced).

Then, in a surprising move, Luke closes this passage the way he opened it. In verses 4-6, he quotes the prophet Isaiah. And the quotation he picks confirms everything that he has reported in verses 1-3. All that Isaiah predicted would happen is happening, Luke reports. It is happening just as God through Isaiah said it would happen. It's happening in real time. And it is happening because God is on the move – and not even Rome nor Herod nor the religious rulers of Israel can even hope to stop Him!

Philippians 1:3-11 is a passage in which Paul the Apostle shares with his beloved Philippian church his prayers for them. In describing these prayers, he first tells them why he is grateful for them (1:3-8). Then he shares with them the requests he is bringing before God on their behalf (vss. 9-11).

Paul's prayer is built around his confirmation, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (vs. 6). God has always been, is and will continue to be at work in each member of the church in Philippi, within their midst as a community, and through them to the city of Philippi.

The Christians who make up the church of Philippi have been chosen, called, adopted as God's children, redeemed, filled with the Holy Spirit, practice together the community of believers and are being used by God to impact the world. Therefore, because they are God's own, Paul remembers them fondly and with joy in his prayers (vv. 3-5), prays for them as they live into their present situation (v. 6), support Paul as their spiritual father in his mission (vv. 7-8), and as they reach out in witness and empowerment to Philippi (vv. 9-11). In their mission, Paul prays particularly for the deepening of their love for each other and the world (1:9; 2:1-2), moral insight (1:9-10; 4:8), righteousness (1:11; 3:9) and in "determining what is best" (1:10; 3:12-16) for the Philippian Body of Christ, for each of them as individuals, and for the people of Philippi.

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