

“Prepare Your Heart”

December 6, 2009

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

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So, how are you doing? Are you getting ready? Are you planning meals and decorating and buying gifts? There is just so much to do. How many of you feel like you might not make it, you might not be ready for Christmas this year? And how many of you feel that way every year? I don't know what it is this year but it feels like we've been at this an awfully long and time is running out fast.

In one of his stories about Lake Wobegon, Garrison Keillor talks about the need for a minister to throw some cold water on everyone's plans during Advent. It's nothing personal it's just part of our job. When thoughts are straying too far from the purpose of the season, we have to drag everyone back, point them in the right direction. It's all part of what Stephen Colbert calls “the war on the war on Christmas.”

I suppose that's one reason why we have passages like these today. Malachi. When do we ever hear from Malachi? Only now, only during Advent. That may be why a lot of people think he stole his material from Handel. They've heard it sung in auditoriums a whole lot more than they've heard it read in churches. But this is part of the Bible and actually a pretty important part of the story.

Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament for Christians. It is actually anonymous. The word “malachi” means simply, “my messenger.” So this is a prophet who goes by his role rather than his name. We don't know much about any of the prophets, but we know even less about this one. All we know is he was compelled to warn his people about God's day of reckoning.

What God's messenger describes sounds very harsh and very frightening. He points to a time when the people will be purified, when they'll be made ready to receive God's arrival. “Who can endure the day of his coming,” he asks, “and who can stand when he appears?” But rather than tell them the jig is up and they have no hope, he tells them they'll be made ready. They'll be refined.

For the messenger that preparation begins at the top, ecclesiastically speaking. It begins with the priests of the temple who have been corrupted and whose corruption has been passed on to the people as a whole. We know a little about that sort of thing. We know how easily an organization can be damaged by the behavior of the people in charge. Think “Enron” for instance. And we know how families can be damaged one generation to the next because of the behavior of parents and grandparents. And certainly churches can be infected with distrust and fear when leaders behave irresponsibly. It makes sense that God's messenger would target the temple leadership as the first to be prepared.

But when it begins it doesn't begin at the temple at all. “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord!’” Luke, unique among the gospel writers, goes to great lengths to tell us when exactly this occurred. Now there may be all sorts of reasons for this, but I think it had to do with the desire to remind his readers that he's not spinning some fairy tale here. John arrives in a real place at a real time. And by the time Luke is writing all these things, all the rulers and governors and high priests on his list are long gone and their influence in the world forgotten. But John, the son of Zechariah, the wild man of the wilderness, his voice can still be heard.

Luke connects John to the prophecy of Isaiah, not to Malachi. Mark's Gospel alludes to Malachi when it speaks of John, but Luke isn't so sure. Instead he gives us this long quote from Isaiah. But that section of Isaiah doesn't really begin there. That section begins with the words, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that

she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." So Luke doesn't see in John's arrival a time of judgment and fear, but a time of comfort and pardon.

But how do we receive that when we're so convinced that we don't deserve it? How do we prepare a way for God when the paths of our hearts are so crooked and rough? I wonder if a part of, or maybe most of the anxiety we feel in the midst of all the preparations we do this time of year is rooted in the knowledge that we'll be evaluated, judged, for everything we do. All of it is measured against some impossible standard that others place on us or that we place on ourselves. How can we prepare our hearts to be comforted when all we know is judgment?

Preparing our hearts begins, I think, by stepping back from all the other preparing we have to do. And I don't mean to say that all the other is shallow or insignificant; I know how important this time of year is to all of us. But I also know how easy it is to become so mired in our need to get it right that we lose touch with the reason for God's arrival, the meaning of Jesus' birth. That child isn't born as an act of intimidation or threat; if that's what God intended, there were so many other ways to do it better. Jesus' birth is an act of love.

Preparing our hearts to receive that love doesn't mean steeling ourselves for a test or a beating. It doesn't even mean being sure that everything about ourselves is absolutely perfect and in place. It means opening our hearts to receive God just as we are with all our messiness and imperfections and allowing ourselves to be comforted, finally, to be loved. God will straighten our crooked paths and will make our rough ways smooth.

Let me share with you a poem by Ann Weems from her book *Kneeling in Bethlehem*. It's titled "The Christmas Spirit:"

The Christmas spirit
is that hope
 which tenaciously clings
 to the hearts of the faithful
and announces
 in the face
 of any Herod the world can produce
 and all the inn doors slammed in our faces
 and all the dark nights of our souls
that with God
 all things still are possible,
that even now
 unto us
 a Child is born!*

Amen

* Weems, Ann, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, p. 51.