

12.08.24 ~ Advent 2 ~ Peace
“A Messenger Is Coming!”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Malachi 3:1-4 ^{NIV}

¹ “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty.

² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

Leader: These Prophetic Words Prepare Us to Receive the King.

All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 3:1-6 ^{NLT}

¹ It was now the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, the Roman emperor. Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea; Herod Antipas was ruler over Galilee; his brother Philip was ruler over Iturea and Traconitis; Lysanias was ruler over Abilene.

² Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests. At this time a message from God came to John son of Zechariah, who was living in the wilderness. ³ Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. ⁴ Isaiah had spoken of John when he said,

“He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming!
Clear the road for him!

⁵ The valleys will be filled,
and the mountains and hills made level.
The curves will be straightened,
and the rough places made smooth.

⁶ And then all people will see
the salvation sent from God.”

Leader: These Words Are Luke’s Historical Account.

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Loving and prophetic God, we come to you in peace this Sunday. Help this time together strengthen our Advent studies. Help us to better prepare our spirits for the many messengers announcing the Messiah who comes. As we prepare for him, may we actively confess our sin and seek out your peace internally and globally. During this season and today’s message, let us draw closer to you as people of peace who love the Lord. And speak to us through your messenger and this message. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Today is the second Sunday in Advent, a season of the church calendar of waiting and preparation for the Christ child as well as a personal season of prayer and contemplation. It is a needed balance to the hustle and bustle of Christmas preparation. This second week, as you can read in the Advent insert, we consider PEACE. Peace in this context is **not** the 1960's graffiti sign or the two fingers up, as in "peace, man!" Peace is a **restfulness** in our spirit no matter what we face. The first passage is prophecy, and the second passage is the fulfillment of that prophecy, or at least the announcement of the coming Messiah from John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin.

Let's look at Malachi first. His prophecy is the last of the Twelve Minor Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. The setting is post-exile Judah, under the rule of a governor. The temple priests have nearly abandoned their duties, and the small group is complacent in their worship, both of which discouraged the few strong spiritual leaders left. Malachi first points out their sin including a disrespect of marriage, and secondly warns of God's coming judgment. He declares that a messenger from God is coming to demolish the temple cults, purify the temple, priesthood, and the people, and to make things ready so that the Lord himself will come into his temple to redeem and save Israel through a new covenant. A few hearers thought the messenger was Malachi himself because that is the meaning of his name "my messenger;" others thought it would be Elijah. But with our 20/20 hindsight, we know that after the great Old Testament era prophets, the first new messenger would be John the Baptist, and the second Jesus! In Matthew 11:7-10, Jesus explains how John prepared the way for him, he who was without sin. Malachi is

the only place in the Bible that the phrase “messenger of the covenant” is used. Isn’t this interesting that when we take communion to remember Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, he says, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” This is textual consistency and proof that the prophecy of a coming messenger is true.

Before John the Baptist or Jesus’ arrival, there was a general expectancy of a Messiah: “. . . the Lord you are seeking.” Israel, though lacking in character, discipline, and fearing judgment, did worry about the Lord’s coming. Their injustices did not make them people of peace. The Lord would purge them like a refiner’s fire—the violent removal of the bad parts of metal, the dross, was burned off to be destroyed. Malachi uses a launderer’s soap also as metaphor. In Biblical times, clothes were cleaned with a form of lye, or potash, an extremely strong soap. This was used to dissolve impurities and bleach clothes. Potash was a mix of sand, wood or vegetable ashes, and animal fats, and very destructive to human skin. The harsh elements would transform the cloth like purging sin would transform the soul. These words of Malachi shocked them into repentance and would rekindle the people’s faith in Yahweh. Christmas and Easter can sometimes do that for folks who have left the faith.

John the Baptist’s prophetic message was also of repentance, through baptism in the Jordan River. His location was the southern part of the Jordan River, near the area of Elijah’s last days near Bethel (2 Kings 2:1-13). Baptism by immersion was and still is an outward ritual of cleansing the heart and soul within. John was Christ’s herald and forerunner of grace and salvation, so John often quoted Isaiah 40, telling how God had paved the way for the Babylonian exiles to return to Judah,

just as he was preparing the way for the Messiah. The desert in which he lived was considered the wilderness; it is dry, rocky, mountainous, and had many caves but very few water sources. If any king were to travel it, the boulders and rocks would have to be removed, and the hilly parts made smooth and traversable. When I was in Israel, our 4-wheelers used well worn paths and trails to drive up into the rocky places; it was hazardous! The rough imagery of his prophetic language and locale conjures up an isolated, quiet place of peace. John's preaching drew people out into this wilderness to find him, repent, and be baptized. Though scruffy himself, he was a person of peace who spoke with the prophetic authority of God, not man. Further on in this same chapter, Luke writes about the social ills that repentance cures. During Advent, it is helpful to re-read the beginning of each synoptic gospel, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, even though we will focus only on Luke this year.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember from our study today is that the **road to Christ's redemption is through the rough and rocky desert** of John the Baptist. This is true for our lives as well. Even if you came to Christ in a time of peace and tranquil upbringing, you have probably faced your own wilderness or dry and rocky deserts and found a way to renew your faith as you came out of it.

What is your wilderness now? It may be painful to even think about, but this Advent is a time of expectancy and also a time of restoration and reconciliation. We should take personal quiet time to reconcile our sin, health, emotional pain, losses, loves, or even successes of the year with our faith or lack of it. Let's not wait until New Years! We need to face our own selves and the violence and tragedy in the world head on,

realizing what we can and cannot do about it. We can pray, of course. And we can faithfully move forward in the hope and peace of Christ's redeeming grace. We cannot get to Joy or Love without recognizing who and whose we celebrate this season, but to do that, we must reflect and repent. It may be sad or uncomfortable, but it is necessary, like Lent. We must **not** just put on a happy face! I am often surprised when grief or a sense of overwhelm sneak up on me, but if I intentionally address those tender areas in the presence of the Holy Spirit, I can accept my human frailty, and what better time to do it? Before Christ comes as a baby and definitely before he comes again in Peace for all eternity.

So, take the time this week to intentionally sort through your feelings, faith, and even stuff. Look at family photos, have a good cry with a time limit, watch a hallmark movie, lose yourself over a childhood memory. **This** is your permission to do so, and it is a human requirement to address our emotions, emptying ourselves so that we will be ready to fill back up with good, faith-filled experiences. Watch less news this week; read the Gospels, Malachi, or Isaiah. The Prince of Peace is coming. Will you be ready to receive him and live out his calling to become a Person of Peace? With peace comes the light of the Lord; may we always share that light. Get ready! Amen? Amen!!

Let us pray. Eternal God, we thank you today and every day for your gift of beauty, hope, and peace. We ask you, the Prince of Peace, to settle our hearts in this season of waiting. Where there is tension, sadness, or fear, bring Your calming presence. May your peace fill our lives, our homes, and our relationships, drawing us together in unity. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.