

“Extreme Makeover – Soul Edition”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 6, 2009

Second Sunday of Advent

Malachi 3:1-7a

Rev. John Wahl

John 3:1-6

At a gathering of pastors I attended this fall, it was suggested that all present take a few minutes to write out their own “tolerate” list. These are the lingering things that inhabit the various spheres of our lives – in our homes, our jobs, our relationships, and our emotional, physical and spiritual self. At home, maybe you put up with unfinished projects or unhealthy habits. At work, maybe you tolerate piles of papers that need filing or discarding. Is there a doctor’s appointment or test that you keep ignoring because you don’t really want to know the results? Is there someone you need to contact to clear up a dispute or discord which has been lingering?

Some of these things might be easy fixes – delayed because we’re too busy or too familiar with the backdrop to really see them. Some are more difficult – we have avoided them because they’re certain to cause us discomfort or pain. Almost any change that we make is painful – at least in the short-term – and we naturally try to avoid that change.

During the Advent season, many people – myself included – are busy preparing for guests and visitors to their home. On top of the seasonal decorations that we bring out of storage, in addition to the regular cleaning and tidying-up that we will do, there are also projects and repairs – which have been put off for a long or short while – that we will now want to address. Because company is coming, we assess our surroundings in a different way, and with a different eye. This is because we know that we cannot fully enjoy our guests while those unfinished, cluttered or broken parts of our lives remain unresolved.

Advent is not only the time for us to wait, but also to get ready for the coming of the Lord. Sometimes that means fixing things that are broken, sometimes letting go of bad habits, sometimes mending that which has been ripped apart, and sometimes moving in a new and uncharted direction.

The words of the prophets Malachi and John are bold and direct. They do not sugar-coat the coming of God, or tell us that all we have to do is sit around and wait. Instead, we are called by John to repent – literally to change our way or turn around.

John is seen as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies – like that of Malachi and Isaiah – the one who will come to “prepare the way of the Lord.” Of course, these prophets – whether from the Old Testament or the New – have a way of telling it like it is, and John is no exception. Luke describes John's dramatic and bold preaching about preparing the way for the Lord, with images of mountains falling and valleys being filled, crooked ways made straight and the rough ways smooth. Things will no longer be as they were, and this will come as quite a shock to some.

John's message is not one of “good tidings of comfort and joy,” but of the need for preparation and the time of dramatic change. He tells us to take a good hard look at ourselves and at our world. The time has come, he warns, for a radical change of heart and mind, a dramatic course adjustment, a renewal of our spirits. And the sign of this conversion is baptism in the waters of the Jordan, which expresses the commitment to a whole new way of living the life of faithfulness to God.

The Old Testament prophets, who preceded John the Baptizer, also did not offer a typical *Courier and Ives* message. “Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” asks the prophet Malachi, “For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.” Both of these images strike us as being not comforting, but frightening. A refiner's fire is the white-hot blaze that melts metallic ores and brings their impurities to the surface. Fullers' soap is the strong, lye-based soap used to bleach the impurities from cloth. Fire and soap, says Malachi. Neither of these things seems especially Christmassy, and yet, we are told that the messenger who comes to prepare us for the Lord – John the Baptizer – arrives with flames in one hand and a strong detergent in the other. He comes to boil off the impurities in our souls and to apply a scrub brush to our spirits.¹

Baptism, we believe, is a combination of a gentle cleansing – dipping our toes in the waters – and a harsher scrubbing away of our sinfulness. When we baptize infants and children, we emphasize the former: as we bless with water and recognize the act of choosing and saving that God has already started. When, later in life, we administer or remember our own baptism, we stress that God has the ability to cleanse us from all of our shortcomings. Then, having been washed clean, we can be a blessing to others, not harming them but helping them; not acting out of selfish desires, but from selflessness.

As harsh as these activities may sound, the purifying process is what can bring out the precious metals which reside within us. In the context of Advent, the words of the Old Testament prophet Malachi offer encouragement for people to

¹ Scott Black Johnston, “Fire and Soap” from *Day One*, 2006

examine their hearts in preparation for the Lord's coming. The image of the refiner's fire – no matter how uncomfortable its prospect makes us – comes with an inherent hopefulness, that even when people experience pain and judgment, there may – in the midst of it all – be a redemptive and purifying purpose at work.

Maybe that is the way you feel when you prepare your home, or your heart, for the coming days of Christmas. Maybe having cleaned up, or cleaned out, or cleansed that which is unfinished or misdirected in your life, you find yourself in a better position to receive what God is offering to you. Maybe when you make and start to actually address your own "tolerate" list, you will realize that some of those things aren't worth the cost of tolerating. When we take those actions in our homes, it's called an Extreme Makeover. When we make that kind of assessment of our souls, it's called judgment. Sometimes, we are so concerned about being judged by others, or worried about the future day of divine judgment, that we fail to see the need to judge ourselves: to look around and assess the various parts of our lives that could use cleaning and cleansing.

Words of refining, of judging, are words of hope for they have the potential to take what is old, stale and corrupt and open it up to what is new, fresh and right. In a time of preparation for Christmas, this text is a reminder that our central preparation is to make our hearts ready, that our true worship is based on living a just life, in keeping with the Lord's covenant.²

John's purpose of preparing the way of the Lord – and his call to a baptism of repentance – conveys the great paradox of our faith, that the free and lavish grace of God really makes no difference unless we are made accountable. The unconditional love of God cannot find a resting place unless we make space in our souls. The free gift of grace means that God does not judge us, at least not now. John does not judge us, although he knows that ultimate judgment is coming. And neither are we to judge each other. But the truth of the gospel is that we must be willing to judge ourselves: to face the truth of who we are and claim the hope of who we want to become.

John the Baptizer makes it clear that this is not just a time of idle waiting, or for staying on a course that will continue to lead us in the wrong direction. If, after making our assessments, we want to change course – and are willing to deal with the sometimes painful realities of change – then repentance is what we do, so that God will have space to make us new people – so that God can complete the baptismal blessing of our lives.³

² Howard Wallace, "Lectionary Comments" Year C, week 2

³ Susan Andrews, "Wilderness Work" in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Dec. 2003

This is also the deep truth that also lies at the heart of Malachi's prophecy. Our gracious God so loves us that God's great desire is to see us freed from the impurities that weigh us down and the grime that covers our souls. God does not say: "I refuse to let you come in for a visit until you clean yourself up." God is used to having our messy selves around. Instead, God says to us: "I am going to help you clean up. I will assist you to throw off the tarnish that prohibits you from truly experiencing the joy that awaits you this season."⁴

When you come to Bethlehem this Christmas, and you want to hold baby Jesus in your arms, you may need to wash your hands first. When you are preparing to hold other babies, you know that you should wash your hands; and if you forget, most new parents will gently remind you. They will have the right soap and sanitizer ready so that nothing harmful will be passed to their kids. Sooner or later, though, you'll remember to wash your hands without the reminder, and you'll experience the joy of being with the newly born child – a joy that will continue to grow.

John the Baptizer came proclaiming a baptism of repentance: a cleansing that we experience when we assess our lives and make the necessary changes: tidying up what is messy; mending what is broken; abstaining from what harms us; and renewing that which has faded away. The days are surely coming: may we turn around and face the one who is the light of the world, that we might all reflect his light. AMEN.

⁴ Scott Black Johnston, "Fire and Soap" from *Day One*, 2006