

“Promise”
Malachi 3:1-4
Sunday, December 6, 2015
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Comedian Dave Barry shares his experience of Christmas programs at his son’s school:

“To avoid offending anybody, the school dropped religion altogether and started singing about the weather. At my son's school, they now hold the winter program in February and sing increasingly non-memorable songs such as ‘Winter Wonderland,’ ‘Frosty the Snowman’ and -- this is a real song – ‘Suzy Snowflake,’ all of which is pretty funny because we live in Miami. A visitor from another planet would assume that the children belonged to the Church of Meteorology.” (“Notes on Western Civilization,” Chicago Tribune Magazine, July 28, 1991.)

In a way, I can understand why our society wants to avoid the Christian version of the Advent and Christmas seasons. There is good news in God’s promises and there is bad news. In our Old Testament reading this morning, Malachi doesn’t mince words. He embraces both the good and the bad.

I. Good News: The Lord is coming. (v. 1)

In Malachi’s day the people are returning from the Babylonian exile. Under the leadership of their governor, Zerubbabel, they finish rebuilding the temple in 516 BC. Forty-eight years later in 458 BC, the people are encouraged when Ezra the priest returns, bringing thousands more Jews out of exile with him. Thirteen years later in 445 BC, King Artaxerxes allows his cupbearer, Nehemiah, to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city.

Nehemiah is appointed governor and reforms the city and the nation by promoting both spiritual and social righteousness. He urges the people to care for the poor and to worship God with

integrity and humility. In 433 BC, Nehemiah returns to King Artaxerxes, as he had promised.

Malachi writes, “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.”

God promises to send a messenger. This is good news!

The name Malachi means “my messenger.” Malachi is the messenger in his day. He brings good news, that the Lord is coming. In Jesus’ day John the Baptist is the messenger preparing the way. John the Baptist brings the same message: The Lord is coming.

God is fulfilling his promises. The Lord is coming. This is good news!

Here’s a story that exemplifies how God can take the smallest act and turn it into good news for many people. (Please forgive my mispronunciations):

“A hundred feet above the Apurimac River, near the remote village of Huinchiri, Peru there is a suspension bridge that connects the Limi-Cuzco Road. It has been there since the 14th century. Using four miles of braided coya grass, the Inca constructed the bridge in phases. First a bowman attached a fine thread to an arrow and fired it across the gorge. A man on the other side tied a cord to the thread and fired it back across the gorge. The cord was then pulled across. One by one the Inca added thicker and thicker ropes, finally hauling into place a 200 pound floor cable.

“The bridge which today is still suspended across the river continues to serve as a major highway for the people in that part of Peru. It began with a single thread. Think how many changes take place in life because of a single phone call, the implementation of one idea, one visit, or a single letter. All great bridges stem from tiny beginnings.”

One pastor comments that, “It is the same for our faith; a single act of forgiveness, a personal commitment to be more involved in the life of the church, a gift or an invitation to a

stranger. Major construction is overwhelming. But every change that is made for the betterment of humankind starts with a single act.

“Isn’t that what God did with the birth of Christ? God introduced the possibility of total transformation with the gift of a child in a manger. In a remote place of the world and through a humble peasant couple, God set the stage for a new kingdom to emerge.” (Keith Wagner).

II. Bad News: Refiner’s fire and fullers’ soap. (v. 2)

This is good news.

But Malachi’s message also includes bad news.

After Nehemiah returns to King Artaxerxes in Babylon, the people return to their old, sinful ways. They rationalize their behavior, naming pessimism and discouragement as their excuse. They have rebuilt the Temple! Why is not Israel immediately returned to the glory days of King Solomon?!

This is where Malachi comes in with his bad news: “But who can endure the day of his coming,” cries Malachi, “...for he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap...” It’s going to take extreme heat and strong lye to purify and cleanse these sinful people.

We don’t like to talk about sin much. Nor did Malachi’s original audience. We like to think of ourselves as flawed but basically good people. Malachi comes along and says that we are all in need of refining and purifying, and that God’s got just the fire we need – very hot – and just the soap we need – very caustic.

Do people still use lava soap? Do you know about lava soap?

I remember the bar of lava soap in my house growing up. It was a special bar of soap that my father would use. It was very coarse and rough.

My father is a gun smith, and in working on rifle barrels his hands would get black with a

ground-in mixture of oil and dirt and dust from the metal shavings.

He would come in at night from his shop and stand at the sink and rub and rub that soap over his hands, getting them all frothy with soap. Then he would take a little brush and scrub away, especially under the fingernails. Which he could never get quite clean. To be honest, I didn't mind his dirty hands. They were evidence of his hard work and his artisan skill.

But in terms of the mess we humans make of things in general, the bad news is that there is not enough lava soap in the world to get rid of the dirt.

The story of Terry Anderson is a beautiful tale of bad news-good news:

“[Anderson] was the journalist who was held as a hostage in Lebanon along with others we don't remember for 2,454 days! But few of us know that he had been raised in the Catholic Church. Even though he had not been a practicing Catholic for years, however, the Bible was given to him during his captivity. He said it came to him as a gift from heaven. He read. He pondered his life. He had lots of time to ponder his life. Too much time to ponder his life. He began a litany of confession in his mind. He confessed that he had hurt his first wife and daughter. He had made many mistakes. He had been a very arrogant person. He wasn't sure that people liked him much. He wasn't sure he liked himself very much.

“Later in the first year of his captivity Anderson became aware of the fact that other hostages were living next door. One was a priest. Father Lawrence Jenco. He asked his captors if he could see the priest. ‘I am a Catholic,’ he told them. ‘I want to make a confession.’

“His wish was granted. Father Jenco came to his room. They both took off their blindfolds. Anderson hardly knew where to begin. It had been 25 years since he had last made confession.

“Father Jenco was encouraging. Anderson began reciting to this priest the sins he had

been reflecting upon. There was much to confess. A bad marriage. Chasing women. Drinking. Anderson found it a very emotional experience. When he finished both he and Father Jenco were in tears. Father Jenco then laid his right hand upon Anderson's head. 'In the name of a gentle, loving God, you are forgiven,' the priest proclaimed.

“Terry Anderson's faith deepened immensely in his hostage years. This moment of confession with Father Jenco, however, was his first formal step back into the church. Self-reflection had grown within him out of the darkness of his hostage encounter. It was time to face the light. It was time in his life for a turn around.” (Richard A. Jensen).

III. Good News: It will be good. (v. 4)

The bad news is that we all have to face the refiner's fire; the fullers' soap.

The good news is that God is good. His plans for us are good. His purposes are good. His promises of refining and cleansing lead us to a future that is good.

Even in the short term, God's good plans for us outweigh our own meager plans for ourselves. And in the long term, God's plans of restoration -- for all of the world, for all of creation, for all of humanity -- those plans are infinitely more wonderful than we can imagine.

Through repentance we allow God to turn our worst news into the best news. Henry Ward Beecher, a famous preacher from the 19th century, has this to say of repentance:

“When a man undertakes to repent toward his fellowmen, it is repenting straight up a precipice; when he repents toward law, it is repenting into the crocodile's jaws; when he repents toward public sentiment, it is throwing himself into a thicket of brambles and thorns; but when he repents toward God, he repents toward all love and delicacy. God receives the soul as the sea the bather, to return it again, purer and whiter than he took it.”

The Good News is that the refining and the purifying are in God's hands. It's going to

happen, no matter what we do or how afraid we may be. God's promise is sure and it is good news. This refining and purifying will happen in God's own way and in God's own time. We can choose whether or not we want to cooperate with God's good plans; but God is ultimately in control. We can count on the promises of God to be fulfilled. Writes Malachi, "Then the offering to the Lord will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old..."

Closing.

When I was a teenager in Clare, Michigan, our Methodist church would have a live nativity scene every year. Now this is Michigan, where winter is winter. Not like here in California. We had ice and sleet and snow with our live nativity scene. We'd wear long underwear and ski suits and ski boots under our 1st century Bethlehem costumes. Families and friends would sign up for one-hour shifts in the nativity scene; behind-the-scenes volunteers would do makeup and costumes, and have hot chocolate ready for us when our shift was done.

We also had live animals as a part of our live nativity scene. Sheep, goats, cows, even a donkey -- from local farms. Hay bales would fill a makeshift manger. Christmas carols would play in the background.

There's "a humorous story about a church having an outdoor nativity pageant using live animals. It was quite a feat, because the church was located in the very heart of downtown in a large metropolitan area. The evening of the pageant everybody was busy making preparations. The donkey that was to be used in the pageant wandered off and trotted down the street. He caused quite a commotion. Finally he entered a nearby bar. Obviously, one of the customers was startled when he saw a donkey come into the bar. The customer pushed his glass aside and decided he had had enough. The bartender, seeing that he was startled, tried to calm him by saying, 'Oh, don't let that donkey bother you. He belongs to the Methodist Church up the

street.’ Thinking about that, the man decided it was time to leave.

“Well, there are some donkeys in the Methodist Church, in the Presbyterian Church, in the Baptist Church and there are donkeys inside and outside the church. In fact all of us act like donkeys at one time or another. But when Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem of Judea, all of us donkeys were raised to a new level. God has come down. Humanity has been lifted up.”
(King Duncan).

“Who can endure the day of [the Lord’s] coming?” asks Malachi.

No one. On our own, we cannot endure the searing heat of God’s refining fire. We cannot endure the purifying that leaves us raw and hurting like lava soap rubbed roughly and repeatedly against our skin.

Enter Jesus. A little baby born as the fulfillment of all God’s promises. We need no longer fear God’s promise of refining and purification. All we need do is put our trust in him – that he is doing a good work in us through his son, Jesus Christ.

It says in Romans 8:28 that “all things work together for good for those who love God.” As we come to the Table this morning, may you claim this Advent promise for yourself. “All things work together for good for those who love God.”

Amen.