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Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

December 6, 2015; the 2nd Sunday of Advent.

Readings: Malachi 3:1-4; Canticle 16 (The Song of Zechariah, Luke 1:68-79);
Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6.

Preparing For, From A Specific Place

Today we have our first Sunday with John the Baptist this Advent; we will hear from him again next Sunday.

We have not yet seen his explosive passion for God, which caused him to address the crowd as a brood of vipers.

So as not to get ahead of ourselves, we will deal with that next week, and some of the very specific instructions from John the Baptist about sharing with others, what we term social justice these days.

Today's readings encourage us to prepare ourselves by listening to the prophets who were inspired by God to imagine and describe God's power to transform the world.

They did so from a particular place and a specific time.

They were invited by God to consider God's promises and God's salvation from the only perspective they could, their own.

Are we not the same?

Do we not struggle to see God's vision for our world from our circumstances, which give us a certain perspective.

What can we learn from Malachi about preparing to welcome God into our lives...in a way that gives focus to the question: what does God coming into my life and into world mean to me, what does it promise?

When inspired to write of God's power to transform the world and God's coming salvation, the one, or those, who wrote what we now call the Book of Malachi, asked who can withstand such

transformation, who can withstand the day of his coming, of God's arrival?

Who among us is truly ready for the salvation and transformation of the world?

Are we prepared for our own transformation?

Do we need to prepare?

Malachi was most likely speaking to the people who had returned from exile and rebuilt the Temple.¹

These were people living in a time of restoration but not seeing the fullness of God's power among them as had been hoped.

As one commentator notes, the people had hoped that through the great events of returning from exile and rebuilding the Temple, God would move, "all of history so that Israel and Jerusalem could be the center of world events, which is promised as a new salvation."²

Malachi was written when, "the rebuilt Jerusalem with its Temple was beginning to look more like a backwater town, than the cosmic center of the universe, where nations were destined to meet."³

In a similar way, we might say that Christianity is beginning to look like a "backwater town" rather than the center of events...given Christianity's place in our culture.

Advent gives us time to think about what the salvation we now experience in Christ means; Advent gives us time to think about what God coming to us now in this time and place in our lives can mean, what we hope it can mean.

Which is another way of saying: Advent is a time of preparing to celebrate Christmas once again.

We prepare for a celebration of great joy---that God came among us

¹ General date for Malachi, 5th century B.C.

² Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C, Advent/Christmas Epiphany*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, p 32.

³ *Ibid.*

through the incarnation, through Jesus, whom we call the Christ, the Messiah, to be our Savior.

But are we a not like the people to whom Malachi spoke?

People living after the promised gift of God? --the return from exile...the coming Jesus, the Christ?

One of two things can happen as a negative result of living after the promise, and I'm speak solely of Christianity here---and these are two extremes.

First, many Christians throughout history have thought that Christianity would become the center of life, that the nations would find salvation in it. Such thinking led to horrific actions by Christians such as the crusades...they were so sure, and they had taken the Christian message and transformed it for their own purposes.

But more often, especially in our time, there is a tendency to think too little of the Christian faith.

This is the sort of thinking that causes one to care about what Starbucks does or does not do with its holiday cups!

If you are not aware of this issue, appreantly in previous years Starbucks had snowflakes, and maybe reindeers, on their to-go cups, but this year they took those designs away and have a plain red cup...and some how this is a treat to Christianity. Please.

What can we learn from Malachi about this?

Malachi, "provides a context for exploring what it means to wait [and prepare] for God when routine threatens to extinguish visions of salvation."⁴

The first Advent of God for Christians, the coming of Jesus into the world, had a long preparation period...we hear about it through the prophets who called people to repentance and to prepare the

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

way for God's salvation.

Malachi was one such messenger who spoke of the One who comes like a refiner's fire.

And who can withstand such the appearance of the Lord who comes to refine with fire?

Unlike the streetcorner self-proclaimed prophets of modern times, our ancient texts have a balance of God's judgment and God's ability to purify that which is, and those whom are, not yet perfect...which is pretty much everything and everyone.

Jennifer Ayres, notes that "a silversmith knows that the refining process is complete only when she observes her 'own image reflected in the mirror-like surface of the metal.'

If this is the case, does the prophet also suggest that the *imago Dei* is restored in this process?

Is humanity deemed good and righteous when once again the divine image is reflected in the human heart?"⁵

How does Christ want to be born our hearts this Christmas?

We are invited to prepare for Christmas spiritually every year, and every year it can be a new experience, because while God is the same, "yesterday and today and forever,"⁶ we change.

How can we prepare to welcome the Christ child?

How can we prepare ourselves to welcome the salvation that Christmas offers us, this year?

How can we make a manger in our hearts?

The story of John the Baptist is set in a particular time and place; all of the political rulers are named to make the point that John's message, and Jesus' coming into the public eye, was happening in

⁵ David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1: Advent Through Transfiguration*. Jennifer Ryan Ayres, Second Sunday of Advent, Malachi, Theological Perspective, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press Epub, 2009, Loc 1098 of 16192.

⁶ Hebrews 13:8

particular circumstances that influenced how people understood themselves and the world.

But into that structured, unfair world, this crazy man John, actually believed God was doing a new thing...breaking in...changing the story...and so John told people to repent and prepare.

For those of you who grew up Catholic and others who were in religious communities that spoke a lot about sin and the need for repentance, you know that even the word 'repent' can do more harm than good.

I invite you to think of it in a different way, and consider how you might prepare your heart for Christmas this year, for Christ to be born anew for you in a way that makes a difference.

We can prepare by taking some quiet time during this busy season to think about our lives, perhaps think about what has happened for us, to us, with us, in the last year.

What are the great things that you want to bring to the baby Jesus as gift?
What will you put in the manger?

What do you want to share with God?

What are the things that have been difficult; how can Jesus be born for you this year in way that heals and binds up what is disconnected?

Perhaps think about your great hopes for our world, even our church, our city, communities to which you belong.

Invite Christ to be born anew for you around those hopes and dreams...prepare for that...imagine with all the prophets and John the Baptist, imagine with our readings from today, what God can do being born anew. Amen.