

## *ARE WE CHRISTIANS YET?*

Malachi 3.1-3; Luke 3.1-6

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### **Lesson: Malachi 3.1-3**

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the God of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to God in righteousness.

**Anthem:** “And He Shall Purify” from *Messiah* – G.F.Handel

### **Intro and Lesson: Luke 3.1-2**

I’ve always loved this piece from *Messiah*. It may not be one of the most famous choruses in that beautiful music. But there is something about its conviction and its hope.

The “messenger” the prophet Malachi anticipates was identified, by the followers of Jesus, with John, the son of Zechariah - one of those “sons of Levi” Malachi imagines being purified. So Luke 3 says:

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee ... during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.*

Those of you who were here for the Advent Evening of Prayer on Wednesday, heard the story of Zechariah – the old priest who was confronted by an angel while he was minding his own business doing his priestly duty in the Temple. Like Mary, he received unlikely news: that

he and his wife Elizabeth, although childless for many years, were going to have a baby. And just like Mary, Zechariah asks: “How can this be?”

However, unlike Mary who breaks forth into song, Zechariah is struck dumb and cannot speak again until his son, John, is born. When the relatives and friends question Elizabeth about a choice of a name that did not belong to anyone in the family, Zechariah signals that Elizabeth is right. His name is John. And, with *that*, Zechariah sings his own song, which you will find printed in your bulletin this morning.

### **Lesson: Luke 3.3-6**

I have to wonder, once Zechariah got his voice back, did he sing his song to his son, John? Did he tuck John in at night singing: “Now bless the God of Israel who comes in love and power?” Did he hold John in his arms and sing: “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go out to prepare God’s ways?”

Of course, there is no way of knowing. But I do wonder.

What we do know is this from the continuation of the story in Luke:

*This son of Zechariah, John, went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,*

*“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make God’s paths straight. Every valley shall be filled [there’s the music of Messiah again], and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”*

Leave it to George Frederick Handel to weave together Malachi and Isaiah and Luke so beautifully that we are lulled into a sense of comfort.

But does it give any of you pause that this Sunday’s Advent texts seem to associate being “prepared” with being “purified?”

Being prepared is bad enough.

I have this recurring dream that I have been cast in a play and somehow I never got around to learning my lines. And this realization dawns on me just as the curtain is going up! I wake up in what I like to call “preparation panic.”

There is a pastor friend of mine who likes to tell me when I am obsessing about a sermon: “O just wing it.” There are no more frightening words in the English language than “just wing it.” Perhaps the reason I never had any interest in being a Boy Scout is their motto “Be prepared.” Because I will admit that I suffer from “preparation panic.” Whether asleep or awake, I have this anxiety about being prepared.

So, when Luke tells the story of John and quotes Isaiah about a voice calling out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” I get chills. And not in a good way.

Worse, putting these texts together with Malachi’s words about being purified, makes it sound like being prepared has something to do with being pure.

And that is really unnerving.

In fact, both the Jewish tradition and the Christian tradition have movements that teach the way to be prepared for the coming of Messiah or the return of Jesus is to be pure and to create a purified community.

Marcus Borg, who wrote the book we are using in Adult Learning along with John Dominic Crossan, says that, in Jesus’ time:

*Purity was also central to two Jewish renewal groups in first-century Palestine. The Pharisees sought the extension of the more stringent priestly rules of purity into everyday life, and the Essenes ... withdrew to*

*the desert wilderness along the Dead Sea, believing that purity could be attained only by isolation from the impure world of culture.*

Jesus, Borg says, stood against these purity movements that imagined being prepared for the coming fulfillment of the Messianic Age – or the reign of God – was a matter of creating a “pure” community. Jesus saw the isolation, and exclusion, and superiority, and the polarization of those purity systems as a threat to the deepest meaning of the reign of God.

Ironically, the followers of Jesus, in the centuries after his life, seem to have forgotten that message.

I grew up among Christians who believed that being prepared for the return of Jesus meant living every day of our lives in moral and social purity, separated from the world.

I remember my dad explaining to me why we didn't go to movies. He said that “we” wouldn't want Jesus to come back and find us in a movie house. My response was that maybe it depended on the movie. That didn't seem to help.

My dad is an example of those who, throughout the history of the church, have believed that there is an absolute connection between being prepared for the coming of Christ and purity. And that concern re-created the very kind of communities that Jesus rejected – communities of isolation and exclusion and superiority and polarization.

In fact, I think you can track all those apocalyptic – those end times – movements as attempts to connect being prepared with being pure.

Even in our vaguely spiritual Christmas culture we get some of these messages:

*You better watch out, You better not cry  
You better not pout, I'm telling you why  
Santa Claus is coming to town  
He's making a list,  
Checking it twice,  
Gonna find out who's naughty or nice.  
Santa Claus is coming to town  
He sees you when you're sleeping  
He knows when you're awake  
He knows if you've been bad or good  
So be good for goodness sake*

Somehow, being prepared and being pure has gotten connected in our spiritual psyche.

And I think one of the issues this creates for us is that we have come to see being prepared and being pure as states of being. That somehow we can claim to *be* prepared or to *be* pure.

I was reading an article by a Lutheran pastor, Peter Marty, who quotes Martin Luther as saying:

*This life is not righteous, but growth in righteousness; is not health, but healing; not being, but becoming ... the process is not yet finished, but it is going on; this is not the end, but it is the road; all does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.*

Marty points out that Luther is writing this as he is about to be excommunicated from the church – a church that is worried about its state of purity, one that wanted to make sure that all those heretics did not stain its theology and was willing to exclude – and to do worse – to any of those who threatened that purity.

I'm guessing the Luther story also illustrates how purity can become a matter of control and power. Marty goes on to say:

*Luther's contention that the Christian life is forever an unfinished product didn't sit well with the powers that be. He was excommunicated from the church within months [of these words].*

Being prepared and being purified are not states of being. They are a becoming. They are not products. They are a process.

I always find it a little awkward when people ask me if I am a Christian. It's awkward in part because being identified as a Christian these days is associated with a lot of things that feel antithetical to what I know of the teachings of Jesus.

But it is also awkward because it doesn't seem to me that Christianity is a status exactly. It's not something completely achieved.

Along with Luther, Pastor Marty, quotes the great poet, Maya Angelou who says:

*I'm working at trying to be a Christian and that's serious business ... It's not something where you think, 'Oh, I've got it done. I did it all day – hot diggity.' The truth is, all day long you try to do it, try to be it. And then in the evening, if you're honest and have a little courage, you look at yourself and say, 'Hmmm, I only blew it 86 times. Not bad' ... I'm always amazed, she says, when [people] walk up to me and say, 'I'm a Christian.' I always think, 'Already? You've already got it? My goodness, you're fast.'*

You have probably noticed that our theme for this season as we are preparing for the promise of Christmas promise is “already, not yet.”

And, if you ask me if I'm a Christian, I think I would say: “Well, yes ... and not quite yet.” It's not a state of being. It's a commitment I make to a process.

And I think there is an important humility in that. It's a resistance to the isolation and exclusion and superiority and polarization that can happen

when being prepared for something like the reign of God becomes a status connected to purity.

But it isn't just about humility. It's about hope. It's about recognizing that being is also becoming. Or as Luther says: "all does not yet gleam in glory, but all is [in the process of] being purified."

Many years ago, when my parents and I were struggling with the truth about my life, I started to despair ever having a relationship with them again. They were afraid for me. They believed that I could not be prepared for the return of Jesus or for my own death while I was living in this "impure" state of homosexuality.

We would go for long stretches without talking – without any communication at all.

Then one day I got a card in the mail from my mom. I was suspicious. I had gotten cards before.

But this one had a simple Bible reference written by my mom. I could tell it was her handwriting.

It said simply "Philippians 1.6."

She knew that I was prepared by all those years of memorizing Bible verses to recognize what that meant. That verse says: "I am confident of this very thing, that one who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion."

In a way, I was not prepared for that. I was not prepared for my mom to make that shift from purity as a state of being to the process in which everything is on its way to its own completion. I was not prepared for this confidence to come from my mother's side of the conversation or that I could hope again.

And, of course, everything did not magically change. There were still a lot of difficult days ahead. But it was an opening. It was a place to begin again. It was hope - an already and not quite yet moment of love in our life together.

I wonder. When George Frederick Handel wove together the texts of Malachi and Isaiah and Luke, did he have the book of James in mind? You remember from the series this summer that James says: “*Pure religion and undefiled is this: to care for orphans and widows.*”

I wonder because those early performances of Handel’s *Messiah* were benefits for hospitals caring for abandoned infants and children and relief for those who were in prison because of debt. It is reported that 142 prisoners were released from jail, “their debts having been paid through the proceeds of the performances.”

And this, after religious leaders of the day wrote articles about how “profane” Handel’s work was. The Bishop of London even forbid the performance of *Messiah* “on the grounds that it would be sinful to represent biblical characters in a theater.”

While church leaders were concerned about a state of purity, *Messiah* was calling out charity – supporting the care of orphans and freeing debtors from prison. *Messiah* was preparing its way with compassion.

Being prepared for the promise of Christmas is not some state of being prepared or purified. It is saying yes to a process held together by humility and hope and the kind of love that is already and not quite yet.

At about the same time Handel was writing *Messiah* and the Church of England was struggling with its purity, Charles Wesley wrote:  
*Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down;  
Fix in us your humble dwelling, all your faithful mercies crown.*

In the middle of their everyday lives, an angel appeared to Mary and to Zechariah and gave them what seemed unlikely news: new life was being born in them. They were not prepared. There were questions about the purity of it all.

But, ready or not, they said “yes.” They were willing to live in that tension of a love that was already and not quite yet. “Fix in us love’s humble dwelling,” they said.

And today, if you hear that voice – that voice inside you that says “yes” – well, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p.53. Peter W. Marty, “Trying to be a Christian,” *Christian Century*, October 24, 2018. About *Messiah* performances and charity, see [www.thetabernaclechoir.org/articles/handel-debtor-prison.html](http://www.thetabernaclechoir.org/articles/handel-debtor-prison.html). The description of religious animosity toward *Messiah* is in Carol M. Bechtel’s *Hallelujah: The Bible And Handel’s Messiah* (The Kerygma Program, 1995), p.5.