

## Good Work

*Ephesians 2.10 (HBG); Malachi 3.1-5*  
*September 1, 2019, Labor Sunday*  
*Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church*



## GATHERING

So, the first denomination in the United States to elect a woman as president was ours. In 1921, Helen Barrett Montgomery from Rochester, NY, was elected president of what was then the Northern Baptist Convention.

She was also the first woman to translate the New Testament directly from Greek to English. And I was thinking of her this Labor Day Weekend because her translation of Ephesians 2.10 is “you are God’s handiwork” created in Christ Jesus for good work. The idea that we are God’s handiwork has a whole different feel to it. It’s different from “we are what God made us” in a newer version or “we are God’s workmanship” in the old King James. There is something more intimate, more tender about “handiwork.” I can see my grandmother with those delicate strings of thread doing that intricate beautiful work called “tatting.”

On this Labor Weekend we are not celebrating you as a “piece of work.” We are celebrating you as “God’s handiwork.”

And we so we sing “praise to God, our highest good, profound respect expressing; God gives us health, life, livelihood, with every needed blessing.” Stand as you are able to sing hymn #6.

## SERMON

*O Savior, let me walk with you in earthly paths of service true;*  
*Tell me your secret, help me bear the strain of toil, the fret of care.*

I want to invite you to do a little name-that-tune this morning. Here’s the text from Malachi 3. When you think you have it, just shout it out:

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

That’s from Handel’s *Messiah*, Part I, Recitative, Air and Chorus.

What didn’t make it into that glorious music is what follows in Malachi:

*Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against ... those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of Hosts.*

Now it may be that what followed the words Handel set to music was not completely lost on him. You may know that *Messiah* was often performed as a benefit. The first performance in Dublin in 1742

benefited hospitals and, according to the notice in the *Dublin Journal* “the relief of the prisoners in several jails.”

You know, of course, that one of the ways people of that time ended up in prison was because of debt. The *Dublin Journal* reported that because of that first performance, “142 debtors ... their debts having been paid through the proceeds of the performances,” were released from prison.

So maybe Handel was not ignoring the rest of that Malachi text. The music prepared the way for those who were vulnerable and those who were prisoners of an oppressive system to be set free.

Now because you are here on this Labor Day weekend, you get a little preview of what is coming in this book folks are writing about our history. And I have to say that we are all indebted to the good work they are doing.

If *Messiah* was the messenger preparing the way for action on behalf of the vulnerable and the prisoners of an unjust and oppressive system, our ancestors send are those same messengers.

Our youngest pastor, Robert Whitaker, was called at age 25 for a one year contract in 1888. He was committed to reaching young people and helping other communities create a church home of their own. And this is what our history says about him: “Whitaker’s later ministry is best characterized by his political activism, ‘participating in socialism, communism, pacifism, the labor movement, and the American Civil Liberties Union.’”

That’s a shocker. Whether that list is meant as accolades or accusations, the fact is that Robert Whitaker was a messenger of freedom for the vulnerable and prisoners of an oppressive system.

Then there is Harold Jensen (1938-1953), another pacifist with labor connections. Seattle Mayor William Devlin called on him to mediate the 1946 machinists strike that threatened to shut down the Port of Seattle.

Then Gus Hintz came along – 1963 to his untimely death in 1976 – who went through his own spiritual evolution. Here’s what the history says:

*In examining why some frequent visitors decided against becoming members, [a church analyst named Wilson] discovered that a few disapproved of Hintz’s increasingly outspoken progressivism, especially his stand on racial integration ... [in a sermon in 1968] he spoke against capital punishment. “Surely,” he said, we believe that all men, regardless of their actions, are worth rehabilitating; if we don’t we are denying that which we profess as followers of Jesus Christ.” In the same sermon, he called for background checks on all person desiring to buy firearms. A few months later, when the Seattle Council of Churches endorsed the United Farm Workers’ boycott of California grapes, he offered the church’s facilities for a workshop that would inform the city’s clergy about the “huelga [strike] week” scheduled for September.*

What I find particularly striking about all this is what people today call “intersectionality;” that racism and criminal justice and violence and labor are not separate issues. They all intersect in some way. Our ancestors knew that. That’s the work they were doing.

And I am convinced that they were preparing the way for us to do our own good work.

At the bottom of that work is, I think, the conviction of Helen Barrett Montgomery's translation of Ephesians 2.10: "You are God's handiwork created for good work." Perhaps that's the biggest intersection of all.

"But I'm retired." You are God's handiwork. And work is not always the same thing as a job. You have good work to do. Some of it is the stories you have to tell. Some of them are cautionary tales. Some of them are inspiring stories you might not even recognize as inspiration. You are a link in that intergenerational chain that will move us into the future. That can be very good work.

"But I hate my job." You are probably not alone but still, you are God's handiwork and your job does not define you. Keep discerning what that good work is for you.

"I don't get paid enough." You are God's handiwork and you deserve a living wage.

"I am unemployed." You are God's handiwork and you have some good work to offer the world. Let's help you try to find it.

"I don't know what I want to be when I grew up." Join the crowd. But you are God's handiwork and you can be sure there is some good work that is meant for you to do.

I'm guessing it wasn't in pastor Gus Hint's job description to host a meeting of clergy to stand with the United Farm Workers. But he did it. And I suspect he did it because he knew that those workers were not just field hands. They were God's handiwork and they deserved a living wage for their good work.

Our ancestors have been preparing us for the greatest intersection of all – that handiwork of God that is you and the good work you have to do.

In solidarity with them, we sing this morning a Mexican folk song that is a favorite of the United Farm Workers:

*De colores ... sing of colors,*

*In the rainbow's bright colors God's promise of hope we recall;*

*Sing of colors that make up the earth and give thanks to the God who created us all.*

You are God's handiwork. And today as we sing, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES: The history about *Messiah* as benefit performances comes from a resource I cannot now recall. In my notes on that resource, it appears on p.40. Helen Barrett Montgomery's translation is introduced by her story in *The New Testament in Modern English* (Judson Press, commemorative publication for the 1997 ABC Biennial Meeting in Indianapolis. The stories of pastors Whitaker, Jensen, and Hintz are included in a new history of Seattle First Baptist Church coming out at the beginning of 2020. The notes about *De colores* is included with the hymn in *The New Century Hymnal*, #402.