

“Listen to the Messenger”

St. Paul’s UCC Church

December 5, 2021

Friends in Christ....

Here we are at the second Sunday of Advent. We have seen the first two candles lit, the first symbolizing hope and today’s representing faith. Advent is a time of waiting, and we do not do a good job at that. It is not a countdown to Christmas remembering Jesus’ birth. Rather it is a time for us to look forward to Jesus’ return whether here on earth or at that place we know as heaven. Advent is a season set aside for studying the horizon, waiting for God to show up.

When and where have we waited? Doctor’s offices. The DMV. Test or application results. A response to a request. In nearly all cases, we do not wait just for the sake of waiting. There is something we are expecting, hoping to happen. In this season of anticipation, let’s pause to ponder the curious concept of the end times. After all, in Advent, this person of Jesus, who came and will come back, is the person we are waiting for. It is a quiet time as contrasted to our culture’s wild consumer bonanza. It lets us examine just how open we are to the birth of Christ in our souls.

Both of our texts today are about listening to the words of the messenger who is pointing the way to the Messiah.

Our Gospel lesson from Luke introduces us to John the Baptist but first let us hear words from the prophet Malachi. Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament. It is one of the twelve books of the Old Testament considered to be from “minor” prophets. Their messages are not minor; it is just that they are short as compared to the major prophets such as Isaiah. His name makes a curious pun for Malachi’s name in Hebrew literally means “my messenger.” Malachi has only four chapters and 55 verses. Let us hear the first four verses of chapter 3:

Malachi 3:1-4

3 Look, I am sending my messenger who will clear the path before me;
suddenly the LORD whom you are seeking will come to his temple.

The messenger of the covenant in whom you take delight is coming,
says the LORD of heavenly forces.

²Who can endure the day of his coming?

Who can withstand his appearance?
He is like the refiner's fire or the cleaner's soap.
³ He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver.
He will purify the Levites
and refine them like gold and silver.
They will belong to the LORD,
presenting a righteous offering.
⁴ The offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD
as in ancient days and in former years.

We don't know much about the Old Testament's closing book. This is the last word of anyone in the Bible until over 400 years later when a prophet named John the Baptist cleared his throat to shout out, "Repent! Prepare the way of the Lord!" And that most assuredly ties in with Malachi's third chapter and explains why it is paired with Luke 3 for the Second Sunday in Advent in the Year C Common Lectionary.

In terms of actual history, Malachi was likely a contemporary of Nehemiah. Nehemiah is the one who re-built Jerusalem after the Israelites returned to Judah following their seventy years as prisoners in Babylon. Even with the return, Malachi is not a happy book. Its overarching message is encouraging: God still loves his people and will still send the Messiah one day. But in the meantime, the people were told by Malachi that they had better shape up spiritually. Because if they did not, then Malachi's message boiled down to this: "Remember how bad it was when the Babylonians came? If you do not shape up, then you ain't seen nothin' yet!"

Like John the Baptist, the main targets of Malachi's prophetic fire were the clergy. The priests themselves were spiritually lax. They didn't preach the Word of God but instead whatever they thought would keep them popular. When it came to animal sacrifices in the restored Temple, it seemed that their attitude was "anything goes."

God's Law asked the people to bring their firstborn cattle and their first fruits, the best of what God had given to them. But that seemed a bit too much to ask, and so the people had gotten into the habit of bringing the worst they had so they could keep the best for themselves. According to Malachi, farmers were showing up at the temple with three-legged lambs and blind calves and cows suffering from hoof-and-mouth disease. When the priests would ask, "Is this the best that you have to offer up to your God," with a wink and a smirk the people would reply, "Yup! Sure is!" and the priest would let them get away with it.

As a prophet, what does Malachi tell the people? First, to purify themselves and then he tells them that God will send a messenger. God has sent a messenger – rather many messengers – to us over the centuries, reminding us that God is truly with us, Emmanuel. But today the messenger is John the Baptist calling out the message of repentance. From Luke 3:1-6

John the Baptist's message

3 In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler over Abilene,² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God's word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.³ John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins.⁴ This is just as it was written in the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

A voice crying out in the wilderness:

*“Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.*

⁵*Every valley will be filled,
and every mountain and hill will be leveled.*

*The crooked will be made straight
and the rough places made smooth.*

⁶*All humanity will see God's salvation.”*

May God bless our hearing of his Holy Word?

The musical Godspell made popular today's a line from today's text where Luke quotes the prophet Isaiah “*Prepare the way for the Lord*”. The song has John the Baptist singing the line seven times and then the chorus repeating it six more times. It gives an introduction to the message of the coming of the Messiah. It is a message of being prepared.

Advent is a state of mind as well as a season of the church year. As a state of mind, Advent is not intended to be preparation for Christmas, the first coming of the Christ child. It is rather a season in which we make present again that miraculous event as we prepare for Christ's second coming, his return to complete what he began long ago.

Remember that Jesus who was born some two thousand years ago entered history to proclaim and witness to that long awaited and hoped for coming of God's reign. The long awaited and hoped for kingdom of God is no longer a future promise. It was a present reality as it had come and was in sight. Advent therefore

is a season which offers us the opportunity to pray for Christ's return and prepare for his second coming, and a new world begins.

John the Baptist called the people to repent of their sins. Repentance in the Greek means change. Change is not possible if we believe that we are already living completely faithful lives. Repentance begins with the acknowledgement that everything is not fine. It is with God's good news ringing in our hearts that we will be enabled and empowered to live faithfully with anticipation and hope between Christ's first and second comings.

We have to consider what was happening in ancient Israel. The area was ruled by the powerful and brutal Romans. There was much poverty. It had been between four and five hundred years since a prophet had spoken the Word of God. Hope was not a part of the people's lives. One reason that people flocked to John the Baptist is that his message gave hope to the common people. The message of hope was that there was someone following him that would bring the Kingdom of God to earth.

Where do we look for hope? Is it in our faith in Jesus? Or is it from some place in the world. Some of the places that people may look to include Washington, Wall Street, Hollywood, etc. Hope will not ultimately and finally come from those places. Hope comes from Jesus!

John's message of hope included repentance. In every case when he was asked for advice on how to live better lives, he always came up with an answer. He encouraged generosity, honesty, and fairness. He told tax collectors not to cook the books so as to line their own pockets. He told soldiers to stop shaking people down and coercing bribes. Basically John told the people to be nice, to tell the truth, to share.

John's strongest words were against the religious establishment. They had sold out to the Romans to keep their positions. They ceased being faithful to the God of Israel. They were leading the people astray. He refers to them as a "brood of vipers," certainly not a complement.

So as long as John restricted himself to teaching folks out in the middle of nowhere, he was safe. But John knew that his message of repentance had to apply to everybody or else it applied to nobody. If the Christ, whose way John was preparing could not speak to Herod's situation, then neither could the Christ speak to any situation. We need to remember this too. Our faith is not a private matter as it makes a difference in how we live in community and with others.

The prophets including John the Baptist spoke a message of hope. That hope was fulfilled in the person of Jesus. He is our hope and strength. That is a big part of our message of Advent. Advent is a call to love, to live with integrity,

and seek justice. Luke wanted people to hear this message that a different future is possible as it was some 2000 years ago and is today.

God's ways lead to salvation. God's glory is revealed in Jesus, the judge who comes to save us. This is the good news that John proclaims, and it is not just good news for us, but for the whole world so that all can see God's salvation. That is God's promise and our hope

Thanks be to God. Amen.