

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Refiner's Fire

Old Testament Lesson

Malachi 2:17-3:4 (NRSV)

¹⁷You have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "All who do evil are good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"

¹See, 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 LORD of hosts. ²But 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; ³he 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 the LORD in righteousness. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Gospel Lesson

Luke 3:1-18 (NRSV)

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as 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 his paths straight.

⁵Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for

you.” ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Bible/Sermon Focus

Over the few hundred years that followed the exile, leading up to the time of Jesus, the messianic expectation continued to grow among the people of God. This messiah was often titled, “The Lord of Hosts.” Now, this title has a particular meaning. “Lord of Hosts” has a military lean to it. The “Lord of Hosts” is the God of war.

After the exile, when Babylon fell to Persia, the people of God did rebuild the temple, but they still mostly remained an occupied people under other empires of the Near East. After Persia came Alexander the Great and Greece, which eventually fell to the Romans. The people of God were subjected to each of these empires in turn. There was little peace in the land.

Some of the people began to believe that God had just forgotten them so they might as well just forget God, while others were waiting for the messiah to come down and trample the empires that had oppressed them. People were stockpiling weapons, hiding out in the wilderness hills, waiting for the violent revolution to begin. Battles between Rome and the community popped up often. It was a regular occurrence for Rome to crucify the leaders and participants of this movement, lining the roads with their bodies in the noon day light.

Then enters John the Baptist, a different kind of leader hanging out in the wilderness with these others. People come to John expecting a weapons hoard, a gathering army, fire, uprooted trees, violence. But they find instead... a call to repent and an offer of grace - the grace needed to make a change, to live differently. They came to John, expecting to take up arms and follow the Lord of Hosts into battle. And instead, they found a call to repent.

When reading both the text from Malachi and from Luke, it is hard not to hear the voice of “fire and brimstone.” Many churches and preachers choose that lens when reading and interpreting what these texts have to say to us today. After all, “fire and brimstone” is what the community was expecting back then, and what they were hearing from their religious leaders as well. But this Advent we are working on managing our messianic expectations. Because when it comes down to it, maybe a “Lord of Hosts” or a violent military leader isn’t what God will send us in a messiah. Maybe God has a different plan, one beyond our own expectations.

Discussion Questions

1. How is John's message, "good news?"
2. What are your experiences with "fire and brimstone" theology? Do you feel that was the message of Christ?
3. Reflect on this quote from Pastor Andy, "*John's audience had been oppressed for so long they had forgotten how to be free.*"
4. Reflect on this quote from theologian Ched Myers, describing John's sermon: "*A discourse of repentance that calls for radical discontinuity with the social, economic and political order enjoys little hospitality today among the dominant culture churches in the U.S. ... The reason is simple: for those entitled within the system, the greatest social value is continuity. From their perspective, the system basically works: it has no fatal flaws, no real competitors, and continues to spread itself around the world.*"

Prayer

O come, thou Root of Jesse's tree, and silence the rulers of this world; O come, thou Key of David, come, and free the captives and the prisoners, conquer the misery of death. O come, thou Dayspring, cheer our spirits by with your justice. O come, Emmanuel. Amen.

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