

Prepare the Way: Refine
Malachi 3.1-4, Luke 3.1-6

On this, the second Sunday of Advent, it seems appropriate to remind ourselves of what this season is about, and what *we* are to be about as we move closer to Christmas Day. As you know, I love to read and I love words, and so I often look up definitions just to be sure I know what something means, or to find a way to define it more simply. So even though I know what Advent means, I checked it out on dictionary.com. The third definition from that source is our church definition: the period beginning four Sundays before Christmas, observed in commemoration of the coming of Christ into the world. The first definition, however, is more generic: advent with a lower case “a:” a coming into place, view, or being. On the rare occasion I use the word advent *not* in a church conversation, I’m usually thinking about something like watching for the first red-winged blackbird to signal the “advent” of spring.

However, I don’t think either of those definitions gives the whole flavor of the season we are observing right now, because the four weeks of Advent, for us, indicate an activity, a progression, a movement toward the actual event. For Christians, Advent (capital A) signifies the time during which we “prepare the way.” We have four weeks in which to review the past year, reflect on our spiritual journey, and make preparations to receive, once again, God’s greatest gift of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

So our Advent sermon theme of “Prepare the Way” makes sense since it’s what we do as we wait: prepare. Of course it’s more than planning holiday menus, decorating the tree, and wrapping presents and baking goodies. For some of us those are enjoyable activities, but for some the whole “preparation” thing just gets to be overwhelming. It would be easy for me to say something simplistic and cliché like: “Remember the reason for the season.” Or, “It’s not the gift, it’s the thought that counts.”

Those trite sayings really are not reassuring or calming though, are they? If you are a worrier or a fretter or a perfectionist or someone who can't say "no," probably nothing anyone says is going to make any difference in your pre-holiday agenda. But I think there's a way to keep your favorite traditions (even when getting them all done drives you crazy) and still focus (or re-focus) on what Advent can be.

Our scriptures for this second Sunday of Advent both focus on a messenger—a prophet, bringing a message to the people, which was both a warning and a reminder as well as a promise. When we hear Malachi's words, we might understand them as warning of destruction, and a judgment from which there is no escape, but I think there's a different, more hopeful, perspective as well.

We are "preparing the way," and today's specific focus word is "refine." When I use the word, I usually think of it in the sense of tweaking my sermon; scratching out words and replacing them with stronger ones, or switching phrases around to make a more powerful statement or to avoid awkward sentence structure. But using "refine" in that narrow way is limiting, and not exactly the point the scripture is making.

The dictionary.com definition of the word broadens its meaning: "to bring to a fine or pure state; free from impurities." Malachi chooses words that draw our attention to the possibilities of Advent: the messenger of the covenant is refiner and purifier. Those are hopeful words, full of possibility. Just as I "refine" the words of my sermon each week so that the message is stronger and delivered with more clarity, moving in a logical progression from start to finish, when *we* are refined and purified, our covenant connection is strengthened and our mission and purpose is clarified. We can then move with more confidence in response to God's call on our lives.

Our covenant is, of course, “based on Jesus Christ, to whom [we] have confessed allegiance and devotion.”¹ We move through the weeks of Advent, welcoming the opportunity to be refined and purified, because these words “offer a promise of change and new beginnings.”²

The point is, sometimes we do need words of warning, or at least reminders to refocus. Refining and purifying can be good things when they draw us back into covenant living. And the thing that I kept coming back to, even as I was thinking about being refined in the sense of being corrected or re-directed, was the element of grace involved. The second Sunday of Advent always emphasizes John the Baptist, who comes preaching repentance, and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We might spend the weeks leading up to Christmas in preparation by reflecting and repenting, and yet this time also “invites [us] to a joyful celebration in anticipation of a radical divine intervention with the coming of the Messiah.”³ Yes, we need to acknowledge our shortcomings and look around for ways to address injustice in the world, but in that recognition and reflection, there is grace. We are part of the work-in-progress, the always and ever coming Kingdom of God.

Focusing on the word “refine” this week focuses us also on the work of the messenger. We hear, in Luke’s gospel, John’s cry in the wilderness as not so much about punishment as it is about renewal. It’s about being “convicted in light of the Great Day of the Lord and a time of new beginning.”⁴ It’s about grace—the call to remember and renew our covenant with God, no matter how far away we’ve wandered.

The words of Malachi and Luke, though the imagery might seem a little intimidating and maybe even offensive to some, speak words that I believe are relevant especially in this time of unrest and uneasiness around the country and in the world. Both prophets point to the signs

¹ (Cotto 2018)

² (Cotto 2018)

³ (Cotto 2018)

⁴ (Cotto 2018)

that will precede the Messiah’s coming, and they urge us to pay attention—to stay alert—not in a frightened or anxious or desperate way, “but with the joyful expectation that God will break through the myriad situations happening in opposition to God’s purposes.”⁵

The texts for today should be gentle warnings to us; calm reminders that yes, we live in a less than perfect world, and yes, we have individually and collectively fallen short of God’s plan and purpose for us, but there is always hope!

One of my favorite preachers writes this about the theme of this week’s texts: “If we set our hearts and minds, one day at a time, on [spiritual] formation, on slow and steady and small changes, won’t we find ourselves shaped into people of stronger and more beautiful faith? [She adds,] A sudden and dramatic conversion may make for a good story, but so does the long and persistent, consistent effort to let ourselves be shaped by the Potter [that’s refining!] who loves us and never loses hope in the possibilities our lives hold. The process [she says,] may be long and un-dramatic, but it is filled with grace.

On the other hand, we can’t focus solely on our own spiritual health or even our own personal relationships. Clearly, God cares about the way our world is organized, and each of us has a role in shaping it.”⁶ (Doesn’t *that* sound familiar?!) We can be refiners even as we are, ourselves, being refined. And that, for me, is what being a disciple of Jesus Christ is all about. Allowing the Spirit to work in us, and then being vessels through which the Spirit flows out of us. John is speaking to us:

*Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

⁵ *Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,*

⁵ (Cotto 2018)

⁶ (Matthews 2018)

*and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’’*

Let us pray, together, that as we are being refined, we are also preparing the way for the Lord! Amen.

Works Cited

Cotto, Irving. "Advent/Christmas/Epiphany 2018-19 Worship Planning Series." *Discipleship Ministries*. 12 09, 2018. https://gbod-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/legacy/kintera-files/worship/YearC_Advent18-Epiphany19-Master-Dc.pdf (accessed 11 15, 2018).

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