

Bible Tuesday for Advent II, 2018

Malachi 3:1-4

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 Lord of hosts. ² 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; ³ 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 the Lord in righteousness. ^[a] ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

The name "Malachi" is Hebrew for "My messenger". Jewish scholars have debated for millennia whether Malachi was an actual prophet or the name was chosen to reflect the prophet's position as proclaimer of God's message. The book was written after the Israelites were released from captivity in Babylonia and rebuilt the Temple.

After the Temple was reconstructed, sacrificial worship was begun once again. While the Israelites learned their lesson about following after false gods, their time in captivity and the reconstruction period left them doubting the validity of the Torah, God's Law. The prophecy of Malachi stresses adherence to the Torah with both promise and carrot-and-stick approaches.

While the prophet proclaims that God is sending a messenger, the identity of the messenger is quite unclear. As stated above, "My messenger" in Hebrew is the name Malachi. Is the messenger mentioned the prophet, himself? Perhaps, but "the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight" might also indicate Elijah or some messiah. But the next verse asking "Who can stand...who can endure...?" would suggest this messenger is God's divine agent who will bring about the Day of the Lord, the archangel, Gabriel, perhaps.

The descendants of Levi were those who served as sextons in the Temple and synagogues of Israel. They did not offer prayers or sacrifices but they did clean and maintain these worship buildings, carry the sacred vessels, make the oil for the menorah, etc. This passage from Malachi suggests that the Levites had strayed far from their appointed duties. Malachi says that their personal offerings to the Lord were not in keeping with the Law. God will reject the sacrifices of all Israel and Judah until the Levites get their acts together.

Luke 1:68-79

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior^[a] for us

in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon ^[b] us,
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Those of you who have sung the Matins canticle of praise may already hear this song as you read this passage. This is the hymn of praise that Zechariah sings at the naming and circumcision of John the Baptist, his son. While John the Baptist appears in all four gospels, only Luke tells us of John’s miraculous birth. Only Luke gives us the songs that Zechariah and Mary sing as they celebrate God acting upon them and, through them, upon all creation.

In Greek, Zechariah’s hymn of praise sings in meter and dances in word play. He sings as a priest who has waited all his life for promises to be fulfilled, and not only his life, but the lifespans of his relatives for centuries before him. God promised to “call out”, “to save”, “to redeem,” and to “rescue” the Israelites from the time of Abraham through Moses, through David, through Isaiah and Jeremiah, through Ezra and Nehemiah, to the Roman occupation. How amazed is Zechariah that his wife, well past menopause, has given birth to their only child, a son, and that this infant is to play a major, long prophesied role in the salvation of all.

Note what Zechariah yearns for in his song. He is a Jewish priest whose calling in life has been curtailed and controlled by Roman pagans. He celebrates that through his son, John, and through the coming messiah, that Israelites might, “serve [God] without fear” and that God might “guide our feet into the way of peace.” “Peace” is also complete wellbeing, which in Hebrew is Shalom. Unlike the psalmists who cry for vengeance against their enemies, Zechariah is singing of freedom for worshiping and serving God in peace.

Philippians 1:3-11

I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, ^[a] for all of you share in God’s grace ^[b] with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more

and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

The apostle, Paul, had a miraculous conversion experience and almost overnight went from being a Pharisee who persecuted first and second generation Christians to becoming a Christian himself. His first couple years as a follower of Jesus were spent in a little house church under the catechumenate of a man named Barnabas. After a couple years Paul and Barnabas set out on a missionary trip, setting up little house churches in towns all around the Mediterranean Sea and inland. Eventually Paul and Barnabas parted company, but Paul set out on a few more missionary trips nurturing the congregations already set up and evangelizing to make new ones. To support himself on these trips, Paul worked as a tent maker as well as taking advantage of the hospitality of some hosts. Paul was eventually arrested in Jerusalem and held under house arrest for years. He could no longer support himself through tent making but still needed food, clothing, and writing supplies. The congregation in Philippi not only supported Paul through prayer and letters in this difficult time, but also supported him financially. Paul was obviously very grateful for the attention of the Philippians, as per his gushing in the opening of this letter.

Paul tells the Philippians that through their support of his ministry, they share in the gospel. I think Christians alive today generally think of supporting missionaries as an obligation or a charity, not the joyful privilege of sharing in the good news of God's love for everyone!

Luke 3:1-6

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

⁵ Every 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;

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

Unlike the other three gospel writers, Luke intentionally grounds the gospel in history, Hebrew style. As opposed to giving a calendar year, time was chronicled by the reigns of various rulers. The Herod mentioned is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great who was king when the wise men came looking for Jesus. Not only does this list of those in power date this passage, it also sets the state for what is to come. There is no separation of church and state, of politics

and religion in this gospel writer's world. Emperor Tiberius was declared by his government as a human god, as were all the Caesars. Pontius Pilate was in an antagonistic relationship with Herod Antipas, as both fought for power over Palestine. Herod Antipas and Philip were engaged in a power struggle with each other for Rome's favor and power over the lands held by their father, Herod the Great. While Caiaphas was technically High Priest over Israel, he succeeded his father in law, Annas, who still had not only his finger but his whole forearm still in the pie. They also struggled with each other for power. Neither Annas nor Caiaphas held much respect for Herod Antipas, who wasn't a real Jew, but rather a descendant of Esau, not Jacob! Into this cesspool of power brokering comes John the Baptist, calling people into the cold, swift Jordan River to repent. Repent! Change direction back to the right path! Reorient to true north! Neither Annas nor Caiaphas, nor even Herod Antipas have any desire to change direction if it means relinquishing power. Pilate might if he could figure out what "truth" was.

The passage from Isaiah that is quoted in this gospel was prophesied to the Israelites either soon to be or already captives in Babylonia. This prophecy promises that they will go back home to Israel/Canaan someday. And when they go, the journey will not be arduous as was the road out of their homeland. No. The trip out was the way to captivity. The return trip shall be The Way of the Lord. The road home shall be straight and smooth, a super highway cut through the mountains and wilderness, back to the land God promised them.