

Scripture Readings and Sermon

December 5, 2021 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Luke 3:1-9

Advent begins with a call for preparation often connected with John the Baptist. Luke dates John the Baptist's ministry beginning during the 15th year of Emperor Tiberius which would be between 28-29 A.D and Pilate as governor (27-36/37). John the Baptist was descended from Zechariah and Elizabeth who were from the priestly family of Aaron. While part of the priesthood is to declare ritual cleanliness, this was always within the context of the Temple. John, however, was calling for repentance and performing the 'mikveh' or ritual cleansing in the Jordan river. In this same area, near the Dead Sea, was a religious group known as the Essenes who rejected the Temple because they viewed it as being corrupt. The Essenes were focused on purification in preparation for the final battle between good and evil. The influence of the Essenes may explain why John was in the Jordan region rather than taking his family's place at the Temple. Another reason may be the symbolism of the Jordan area as the entry point into the promise land. This symbolic point would refer both to the entry by the freed slaves of Egypt as well as the route known as the "Kings Highway" taken by the returning exiles from Babylon. This route is referred to by Isaiah as the "way of the Lord". By calling people to repent and be baptized, John was calling the people to remember their covenant and enter into the promise land with a renewed sense of dedication. This renewal of dedication is what the season of Advent still calls to us as we prepare the way.

Luke 3:8 Bear fruits worthy of repentance.

Is verbal repentance enough?

Do your actions reflect a change in your life?

What habits do you need to let go of?

Do you daily choose God's will and not your own?

What do you need to do in order to prepare the way of the Lord?

Commentary on Malachi 3:1-4

The Book of Malachi was most likely written during the time of exile when what was left of Israel was a vassal state of Persia under Xerxes I. The name Malachi literally means "my messenger". The entire book is condemning the moral laxity that Nehemiah would address when he goes back to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. Just as Malachi was proclaiming judgment on a religious system that had become complacent, John the Baptist is also seen as condemning the same complacency. Instead of Nehemiah returning to rebuild, however, Jesus is coming to tear down the preconceived notions of a Messiah. This is the only passage of Malachi read during the three years of the lectionary. It is read in conjunction with story of John the Baptist. It should be noted, however, that Malachi 4:5-6 is also important in relationship to the Gospel story. It is in Malachi that it is foretold that Elijah will appear during the day of the Lord. This passage is referred to in the context of the transfiguration and the question of who is Jesus.

Malachi 3:2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire...

What is the purpose of a refiner's fire?

Is anything not the will of God "impure"?

What parts of your life are your will and not God's?

Is there anyone whose entire life follows completely God's will?

Are you ready to have your will burned away on the day of the Lord?

Commentary on Philippians 1:3-11

At first glance, the reason to include this text at Advent may not be apparent. The key is Paul's reference to the "day of Jesus Christ" and the "day of Christ". Advent is not just a time to remember Jesus' coming as an infant in Bethlehem but to determine if we are prepared for His second coming. By placing ourselves in the lives of Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, and John the Baptist, we can imagine how unexpected Jesus' first appearance was to those living out their ordinary life. Paul warns the Philippians that the day of Christ will be just as unexpected. Until that time, Paul advises them to be blamelessly working toward the harvest. This is a reference to Jesus' accusation that the harvest was great but, despite the number of scribes and priests, the workers were few.

Philippians 1:6 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.

What is the good work that was begun in you?

Who started that good work? Who will bring it to completion?

Do you have the power alone to bear the fruits of repentance?

How do we assist the Holy Spirit's work within us?

What does sanctifying grace mean to you?

Reflection on Luke 3:1-9, Malachi 3:1-4, Philippians 1:3-11

Sermon "A Wonderful Life"

The song says that "It's the most wonderful time of the year". So why are we reading scriptures about repentance and judgment? Some would argue that the crass commercialism of Christmas holiday shopping needs to be countered with a good dose of repentance. The selection of these readings, however, goes back further than our modern commercialization of this blessed season. So if Jesus is the joy of humanity and brings peace on earth, why focus on repentance and preparing for judgment? Maybe it is the same reason we need to remember Good Friday before Easter.

Like those who only come to church on Palm Sunday and Easter going from one celebration to another, we want to jump from Thanksgiving to Christmas. No one does this sugared covered holiday season better than Hallmark. With their romance movies and season specials, it is easy to get pulled into a full month of holiday celebrations which is probably why my daughter enjoys them. The one movie she doesn't like because it is "too depressing" is "It's A Wonderful Life". Frank Capra makes the viewer go through the dark in order to appreciate the light. Maybe before we can declare it is the most wonderful time of the year, we first must realize that it is a wonderful life.

Like the angel Clarence, the John the Baptist and Malachi want to remind us what our "Bedford Falls" world would be like without God's compassion and mercy. Without the transformative grace of Jesus working in the lives of the George Bailey's of the world, we would live among broods of vipers where no one would be able to stand on the Day of the Lord. Before we can truly appreciate the miracle of Christmas, we are called to reflect on what our lives would be like without Jesus. How has the good news of Jesus affected our lives and the life of our parent and grandparents? Where would we be without those small acts of compassion done by people who are simply trying to love others as God has loved them. Maybe in order to truly experience the joy of Christmas we must first recognize what sad life it would be without the baby born in Bethlehem.

The good news is that Jesus was born and is born again in the lives of the believers. When we open the stable of our hearts to the messengers of God, by faith we find the Christ child born in us. Jesus, however, is not a quiet baby. This baby wants you to get rid of all those things that are not baby friendly. All of those obstacles to grace must be removed. Those sinful temptations that are calling you away from the baby must be let go of in order to spend time with the growing life of holiness

within you. We must make straight the paths in our hearts so the Christ can move about. We cannot, however, do this alone. We need a Mary Poppins – we need the Holy Spirit!

It is the Holy Spirit who points out where we need to clean, what we need to throw away, and how we need to prioritize our time. The Holy Spirit begins the good work in us and perfects our love over time. As the Christ child grows in our hearts and our thoughts and priorities begin to change, our hearts are transformed. We begin to resemble George Bailey. While others can see our love and compassion, we are just doing what is coming out of our hearts. God's love and grace begins to overflow in ways that we are completely unaware of or truly appreciate. All because we choose to welcome the Christ child rather than our sinful self-centered habits. Without Jesus, life is not so wonderful but with Jesus it truly is a wonderful life!