

“Message Priority”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Malachi 3:1-7; Luke 3:1-6

Richard E. Otty
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Second Advent

I wondered why our Gospel lesson about John the Baptist was only six verses this year. Then I recalled in most other churches I have served, I have only preached three of the four Sundays of Advent. Either a choir cantata or children’s program became the word proclaimed on one of the four.

In those three Advent sermon years, I did not want to skip the Second Coming lessons of the first Sunday of Advent, nor Mary’s Magnificat, an annual lectionary text for either the third or fourth Sunday of Advent. So, since John the Baptist was given two Sundays, I would combine this morning’s messenger lesson with next Sunday’s brood of vipers text. When that happened, my tendency was to focus on the brood of vipers, if for no other reason than it is a fun phrase to say, “brood of vipers,” but also, if I would call people a brood of vipers, I could simply say, “John said it!”

This year, the vipers will wait until next Sunday, and it has been good for me to focus on the role of messenger, included in both the Malachi verses of our Call to Worship, and the lesson in Luke we are about to hear. It is not actually clear to scholars if there was a prophet of that name roaming Israel in the 600’s BC, but the name Malachi means “my messenger.”

A note before our Gospel text. We will hear God’s word came to John the Baptist in the wilderness. Wilderness means desolation, implying a place that is not inhabited. It is not an inviting place. In our day, the phrase “a lone voice in the wilderness” often means someone to whom no one pays attention. In Scripture, the wilderness is where one pays attention. Even for us, it often takes wilderness times for us to hear the full impact of our life choices and sense a change needing to be made. God does good work in the wilderness, and we listen to voices that emerge from it.

Let us hear God’s word to us in 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 of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, ...

Whoa! What is Luke doing? To give us the date for the arrival of John the Baptist, son of Zechariah, Luke gives us the names and titles of seven men of power in empire and temple. Why didn’t Luke just say, “About 28 or 29 years after Jesus was born, *the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*”? I suppose there must be a reason, but let’s start our lesson again with my simpler suggestion.

About 28 or 29 years after Jesus was born, *the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.*

³*John 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.
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.' '*

John the Baptist called people to repentance, to change their hearts and lives to be ready for God's new day. Malachi used images of a refining fire and cleansing soap. We can be sure his soap was not Oil of Olay, or even Dove with cold cream – Malachi envisioned a cleaning with lye soap, or Lava with pumice, or even undiluted Dr. Bronner's peppermint! The idea is not to soothe, but to cleanse, and even sting.

I don't know about you, but I don't really want some prophet telling me what I need to do, much less a preacher who reads the prophets in her or his own way! For one thing, how do we know when the messenger or message is from God. I mean anyone can say they have received God's word in the wilderness.

Many of us are flooded with messages, though more by email and text these days than even the phone answering machine. Even with a good spam blocker, our messages pile up with both stores and organizations from which we swear we unsubscribed months ago. There are also the less annoying, but still numerous "reply all" responses simply indicating someone will attend a meeting. It is easy to become message and messenger weary.

When there are so many messengers and messages, I tend to curl up and ignore them all. Or I may think, "I really know someone who should hear that message, who could benefit from a strong cleansing, or even a refiner's fire to straighten out their lives. But me? I'm in pretty good shape."

That is where we are caught by Malachi and John the Baptist. Neither is what we call an evangelist, preaching to non-believers. Both are messengers for insiders, for those who have made the commitment of faith, but may not recognize the need for a bar of soap. Both Malachi and John are calling the faithful home. John is gathering them at the Jordan.

To this day, the Jordan River is a boundary line. In Scripture it also marked a place of crossing over into something new. It was at the Jordan the prophet Elisha struck the water with his predecessor Elijah's cloak, and crossed over to begin his own prophetic journey. Earlier in Israel's history, Joshua led the people of Israel across the Jordan and into their promised land, and in so doing, symbolically washed off the dirt they had carried from their enslavement in Egypt. Now John comes to the Jordan, and offers a baptism of repentance to wash off the people's dirt so they can make ready a highway for God.

At Advent, we are to envision ourselves called by John to the river to be made ready. Readiness is a theme of Advent, but I wonder if this lesson might work better in late summer or early fall, not two and a half weeks before Christmas. At this point in December, the readiness gene at work in us is more about the Christmas tree than the Christ child, the gifts to mail more than the gift of Messiah. We may even wonder, "Why did Jesus have to be born so close to Christmas?"

A part of us resists Advent's message. I know some would like at least a bit of Christmas in our worship during December. I mean the shopping malls, the grocery stores, and even the big box stores are all piping Christmas carols through their speakers. Why do we have to linger and sometimes suffer through those less than familiar and often discordant Advent songs?

Yet, I think a part of us realizes we cannot simply coast to the manger as if it is simply one stop on a culturally defined Christmas highway. It is the gift we can only truly receive by readying ourselves. So, we do well to ponder how we might find a little wilderness time, even in these last weeks preceding "Joy to the World, the Lord is Come."

We begin by acknowledging Advent as a season of anticipation and preparation, of refining and cleansing. For some of us the refining might be to own an addiction we know is consuming us, and seek help. For others, it might be reconciling with a friend or family member that will ready us for Messiah. For still others, it may be a commitment to actually take action about the skewed priorities of time or money we've been talking about but done nothing about.

Advent is our time to seek out the messenger and give the message priority. When we hear Malachi and John, we are reminded to submit to a refinement to make us fit for God and ready for Christ. Why do we need to be ready? It may have to do with those names Luke used to date John's arrival.

Those named leaders of empire and temple are more than just a tool Luke uses for dating John's arrival. Six of the seven were involved with carrying out Jesus' crucifixion. Luke is not shy about placing his Gospel square in the face of political power. We'll hear it again on Christmas Eve, when Quirinius was governor and Caesar Augustus called for all the world to be taxed. Luke says, if you follow this Jesus for whom John is the messenger, you are going to run head on into powers and principalities that will seek to define you, and they come in all political stripes.

As we hear John's call to prepare the way, it is not just for Jesus' birth. When John uses Isaiah's words of making the path straight, it was not to describe a highway construction project. It was a call to political action and social justice. Luke keeps before us the truth that God can and God will navigate the faithful through any political power or religious barrier that sets a priority on security of nation or institution while ignoring the most hurting of society. The filling of valleys is a call for justice for the oppressed, and the leveling of hills and smoothing of rough places is a plan for equality for the powerless.

To take on this work, we need a wilderness time and space to prepare, to make ourselves ready, because there is too much distraction in the headlines, and allure in the busyness of our lives. "Prepare the Way, O Zion" is a hymn, but we might think of it also as our call to readiness: "Prepare the Way, O Sudbury, or O Marlborough, or Hudson, or Acton, or Concord, or Framingham, or Natick, or..." "Prepare the way, your Christ is drawing near. ... His rule is peace and freedom, and justice truth and love."

That is what John declared at the Jordan. Let us not allow John to be a lone voice in the wilderness. Let us go down to the river to pray. Let us go to the river with our bars of soap, to clean up and ready ourselves. As we stand with John at the river's edge, we will sense a readiness. Let us then cross over together, and boldly carry our Advent banners of hope and peace, and the coming ones of joy and love, and place them in the face of the world's despair and fear, sorrow and hatred. And let us be ready to declare these are our message priorities for all people.