

Advent 2C
December 6, 2009
Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 3: 1-6
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I hope you've been reading your Advent devotion booklet of meditations written by St. Martin parishioners. It's one way we can mark the progress through this season of waiting and preparation for Christmas. For many of us Advent is a favorite season: an invitation to slow down, to focus on what's really important, and to prepare not just for Christmas Day but for the birth of Christ in our lives again.

Growing up in the Presbyterian Church we didn't make Advent wreaths or even recognize it as a season of the church. As a child I understood the real meaning of Christmas as well as most children who went to church every Sunday. But preparation for Christmas meant going to my uncle's farm to cut down a cedar tree. It meant getting out the tree ornaments, increasingly handmade as more Johnston children appeared on the scene. And we hung the Christmas stockings, each one with our name knitted into it, and watched as my mother made a star out of a nightlight and hung pine greenery around the crèche. All of this was preparation for Christmas and, of course, the arrival of.....Baby Jesus and Santa Claus.

There was no separating them - they were inextricably linked, the baby in a manger and the jolly old elf. And it's not surprising. I expect ours wasn't the only house in which our Christmas Eve bedtime preparation included readings from Luke's Gospel and Clement Clark Moore's *Night Before Christmas*. We said our prayers, and we left milk and cookies on a plate near the fireplace. We sang O Little Town of Bethlehem, Silent Night, and Santa Claus is Coming to Town.

As adults we leave behind the childhood preparations focused on being good and turn our attention to a different type of preparation: preparing our homes and our lives for a deeper meaning of Christmas. We decorate our homes and prepare special food, select and wrap gifts, and make up the guest rooms for holiday visitors. We become especially aware of the needs of those less fortunate and we share our food, our gifts, and our helping hands with those who have no homes or special meals to prepare. And so we make progress from the self-centeredness of childhood Christmas to the other-centeredness of grown-up Christmas. We remember it's not about what we get but what we give.

But wait. Maybe we should reconsider the childhood anticipation of Christmas. As silly as it might sound, there's something to be said about the preparation that children do for Santa Claus. Waiting and hoping for Santa meant paying attention to our lives. It meant not fighting with our siblings, keeping our rooms cleaned up, and doing chores without the usual complaints or forgetfulness. The threat of switches and ashes instead of toys and candy was sufficient motivation to maintain good behavior for at least the first weeks of December. In fact, the sentiment of transforming our lives and getting back on the path of goodness is not that dissimilar from the words of Malachi we heard just a few moments ago.

Written some 500 years before the birth of either John the Baptist or Jesus, the book of Malachi focuses on a time not of blatant evil or idol worship but of inattentiveness in the life of Israel. The Jews had returned from their exile in Babylonia, happy to be able to rebuild the temple and resume worship there. Soon, however, the thrill of homecoming had worn off, the time of crisis past. The temple was rededicated and as life got back to normal the people became lax and their enthusiasm for worship faded. Malachi warned of God's displeasure with the backsliding and cautioned that God would send another messenger to purify Israel.

Two images - fire and soap - carry the weight of the prophecy. The refiner's fire and the fuller's soap remind the people that God's judgment is both real and purposeful. Metal that has turned brittle and dull becomes pliable and can be restored to a polished luster in white-hot fire. A fuller was someone who cleaned wool in preparation for making cloth. Fuller's soap was used to wash the mud and brambles from the coats of sheep so that the combed, softened wool could be woven into a new garment.

So what is the Good News in this? What exactly are we excited about in facing the refiner's fire and getting a good scrubbing with fuller's soap? First, we're reminded that we are not called to live perfectly but to live faithfully, and that by recognizing our brokenness and reorienting our lives in new directions, we have the full expectation of God's promised grace.

When we hear the word "judgment" it's easy to hear "punishment." In Malachi, and in other prophetic writings, though, God's real and purposeful judgment is cleansing and purifying. It's not about retribution but about restoration. In our Gospel reading, John the Baptist cleanses with water, offering a baptism of repentance and preparation for new life. Again, it is filled with expectation and hope. In fact, by quoting from the prophet Isaiah, Luke underscores the expansive inclusiveness of God's judgment: "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." All flesh.

Judgment means redemption of all people, not just the chosen and not just the wicked. Judgment is a vision of hope, a promise that God is not finished with us yet. It means that God's redemptive work is still unfinished, and "all flesh" means you and me and all who hear the word of God. It means that God's vision of humanity restored to perfection is alive and well and working in us, leading us toward Bethlehem and new life.

Perhaps this year we might approach Advent and Christmas with more child-like anticipation, recognizing that there is a connection between what we do with our lives and what happens for us at Christmas. John the Baptizer was not baptizing to introduce a new religion nor was he continuing the Jewish practice of periodic ritual cleansing. Instead, he offered a release from sin and reorientation of life. When we embrace the judgment of God we establish the link between letting God work on us so that God can live in us.

The real purpose of Advent, then, is not so much about doing less or refraining from singing Christmas carols as it is about unburdening ourselves of guilt and sorrow and anger and all the fullness of sin that blocks our love arteries and slows down the flow of new life. Advent offers us another opportunity to take a look at our lives and ask: What is covered with dirt and brambles, waiting to be cleansed and combed and softened, ready to be woven into a garment of new life? Where have fear and anger and hurt made our lives brittle and dull? What needs to be cleared out of our houses, our lives, our bank accounts, our relationships, our theology, and our assumptions about God and about others who are different from us?

Advent preparation is about the house-cleaning of our lives, and plumping up the pillows of our hearts in loving anticipation of the One who wants not just to visit, but to move in, permanently.

O Come O Come Emmanuel.
God with us.
God working in us.
Let us make room and be glad.
Amen.