

2nd Sunday of Advent

Sermon 12.6.15

Scripture: Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-9

You know about John, but I will tell you anyway. This is, after all, the second Sunday of Advent and so that time to tell once again of John, though this time according to Luke.

In fact, most of the year ahead will be according to Luke. A skilled and gracious writer, the only Gentile writer of all the writers whose books fill the Bible, Luke holds in store for us no small amount of loveliness.

John, however, is still John. That's not to disparage him, just to take his as seriously as he seems to mean to be taken.

He was born, though in extraordinary circumstances, also in ordinary ones. Luke wants us to know that. Luke wants us to know that the things of God might yet be found in the world or might yet play out in the world. We'll see this in the shepherds to whom word of Jesus' birth first is spoken, first announced. Matthew remembers Magi from the East arriving, beautiful, wealthy, powerful even. Luke remembers shepherds first told and first to arrive—shepherds who were neither wealthy nor powerful, and quite likely weren't beautiful either.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

John was born, though in extraordinary circumstances, also in ordinary ones. Hence the list of all the people who were there at the time. Hence this list of people who were really real: Emperor Tiberius and Pontius Pilate, Herod and Philip and Lysainius, Annas and Caiphas. It's as if Luke was anticipating incredulity among his readership. This *really* happened.

But maybe that's an anachronistic reading. Maybe that's me reading 21st century skepticism onto ancient storytelling.

On the other hand, there are—and so were—reasons to be skeptical.

John was born of parents who were old and long-barren—Zechariah who was a priest in the Temple and his wife Elizabeth who was, along with her husband, getting on in years.

What's more, according to the story, while Zechariah was in the sanctuary offering incense to the Lord, and while the whole assembly of the people was praying outside, an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah and said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has

been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

And then there’s this, that Zechariah himself seems to have been skeptical. “How will I know that this is so?” he asked the angel. “For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years.”

But the angel—Gabriel as it happens—didn’t like being questioned. So he struck Zechariah dumb, a state in which he would remain for the length of Elizabeth’s pregnancy with John.

Shortly after this, an angel appeared to Elizabeth’s kinswoman, Mary, and told her news not dissimilar. She also would conceive and bear a son. This also was wondrous, though not because she was old but because she was young, a maiden. And she also was to name him as stated by the angel, though not John, Jesus.

John and Jesus were cousins, born perhaps three months apart.

John and Jesus were also intertwined. As in untero, so in life and also (sadly) in death, John would ever go ahead of Jesus—would confess wonder and faith in him, would confess doubt and implicit disappointment in him, would die as Jesus would later die at the hands of reckless and feckless rulers, though not on a cross but in a dungeon, beheaded as a party trick. And for all this, John is imagined to have been one as of whom Malachi prophesied: “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.”

John is often felt to be a threatening figure. We’ll be with him next week, too, when we’ll witness more reasons why this feeling persists. As for now, this is enough, that he is anticipated to be like a refiner’s fire and like a fuller’s soap.

Refiners use fire to burn impurities out of a substance, to reduce that substance to its most essential state. In the case of refined metal, this would be stronger and less vulnerable to corruption than unrefined metal.

Fullers scour and mill wool in the raw so it can be used to make clothes and blankets and other functional things. Whereas once urine was used in the fulling process, eventually a soap was developed that was just as effective.

This was all rough work. Each process involved engaging the raw material with force and with an acceptance of this obvious fact, that the given state of the raw material simply wouldn't do, that it needed to be transformed in order to be useful to some greater good.

You see where Malachi is going with these metaphors.

So maybe this is upsetting news to you — because I imagine it doesn't escape your suspicion that you are that raw material, you and I both. We are all, according to this metaphor, mixed metals in need of purification in order to be strong enough for some though undefined use. We are all as wool freshly sheered of sheep who have themselves been living outside, and getting sticks and mud and poop worked into their wool, and so we need not simply a good washing but a fulling and a milling in order to be wool you might actually want on your body or on your bed.

So maybe this is upsetting news to you — that you're good but not so good that you don't need some working over, that you've got integrity but not to such a degree that you couldn't use another round of refining.

On the other hand, it's also true. Upsetting though it might be, it's also true, which I say with confidence because of whom would it not be true? Who among us finished, fully and perfectly formed? I know I'm not.

When I was a teacher I was to grade my students on their conduct in class, on a scale from one to four, one being of the best grade and four being the worst. I graded one student, a seventh grade girl, a two. She sometimes talked in class, or arrived a little scattered because of what exciting goings in the hall — typical stuff for the seventh grade girl. It threw her mother for a loop. Why did I not like her daughter? Why was I impugning her character? (It probably didn't help that this was coming not only from her daughter's English teacher but also a church pastor.) I kept trying to explain that I did like her daughter, and that I thought she was of fine character, as far as it was mine to examine. It's just that sometimes she talked in class, which is to say sometimes she behaved like a seventh grade girl. I think I even said to her mother, it's just that she's not finished. She wasn't yet fully and perfectly formed. But who

cares? She was in seventh grade and she was there to work on that sort of thing. School was to be for her fuller's soap.

But if it comes just too close for you this morning, if it's just more than you can do to consider your own personal need for such things as refining or fulling and milling (we all have bad weeks, after all, and each of us has our limits as to how much refining we can actually take on any given morning), then consider our collective need of these. For certainly the world is yet in a state of un-refinement, of rough and raw messiness. Just a glance at the events of the last week—the terrible events, shootings, bombings, random and strategic violence, hateful rhetoric from all around and not least from people who would rise to federal leadership: just a glance will tell you some refiner's fire might be a most welcome thing.

And at this I'd quickly point out that refining fire is different from punitive fire. Fire meant to refine is something other from fire meant to torment. Really, it's imperative that we recognize this distinction, imperative (yes) when we fear such fire as happening to us and moreover when we imagine it coming to those whom we think really need it, really *deserve* it.

This isn't hellfire we're talking about here. It's an artisan's.

It's also worth noting that to consider a collective need of refining, instead of some individual need, isn't a dodge. It's not a dodge to take the critical gaze off of you yourself and to widen the focus to all of us.

After all, the world to which Malachi prophesied, and the world to which John the baptizer came (and yet comes, as Christ has come and yet comes) as just such a refining, fulling presence, were each a world (though four hundred years apart) untouched by modern (and postmodern) individualism. Malachi prophesied to the Jews of the Second Temple period, probably around the year 400 or 500 before the Common Era. John, of course, lived during the first century of the Common Era. But these had more in common with each other than either would have with us in this era, whatever we might call this era—modern, postmodern, post structural, globalized. Take your pick. In fact, I think it's hard to overstate how profoundly different our experience of ourselves and our world is from these same things to someone who lived in the ancient near east, and for the reason that individualism was simply unimaginable, as unimaginable as not living under its pervasive influence is unimaginable to us.

I think we forget how individualistic we all are. I think it's the given of our age that is perhaps the most difficult to imagine otherwise.

That's not to judge and condemn individualism. There's a lot about this paradigm that I think is good, very good. In fact, if I were to judge it by its fruits, some of which are democracy and civil rights, the notion that education for all people is good and right, and that medicine is to be practiced not only for public health but also for individual well-being, I'd say on the balance individualism as a paradigm is far more beneficial than detrimental. Moreover, I'd argue that it is, to some degree, a product of the gospel, of Jesus considering individual human beings whom he met along the way and blessing them (or challenging them, which also is a sort of blessing) as individuals. Not casting them as merely what their social world cast them to be, but recognizing in each encounter—so many remembered in the gospel accounts—as an encounter with a single, unique person, Jesus blessed both the individual soul and the collective communion.

It's just that these days in this country especially at this time among the generations that hold most sway (the boomers, though in decline; Generation X, small in number as it is; and the Millennials on the rise) individualism rules.

Recently, Lois Lowry's book intended for middle school readers, *The Giver*, which was first published in 1993, was made into a movie. One critic I listened to engage the movie wondered why it was made in the first place. The story is about a dystopian society in which there is no conflict, no suffering, but because each member of it has converted to Sameness, an ideology and way of life that is, as the name indicates, about total conformity. It won the Newbury Prize twenty years ago when it was released, but even then its set of concerns was on the wane. Though the question of whether to conform or not is always a live one for kids emerging into their teen years, that familiar conflict these days is a little different because lately it's less about becoming the same as everyone else and more about getting in with the group that most expresses your own (if forced) personality and individuality.

The adolescent world, like all the world, has shifted from being a totalitarian state to being tribal.

Yet individualism persists, rules.

One place where individualism is especially tough to take, though, is where it mixes with biblical prophecy and judgment, with religious teaching and proclamation of many sorts really.

Considering this through the notional prism of sin, it seems to me individualism is a heavy load to bear when mixed with sin—sin, which then becomes more about personal failings, your own deep perversions and disturbances, rather than what I think it pointed to in the first place, social and structural failings that perpetrate oppression and violence in the world.

Really, the idea of sin as something that each individual must be mindful of all the time, must work to overcome or rise out of, wasn't nearly as central in pre-modern practice of Christianity as the notion that sin collectively held and so is to be communally worked out. Yes, Paul said we must each work out our salvation in fear and trembling. But the prophets were always talking to a people, not to a person. And Jesus was more concerned with the powers and principalities than he was with Judas as the individual who betrayed him or Caiaphas as the individual who turned him over to the Roman rulers or Pilate who saw to his crucifixion. Jesus saw that his argument wasn't with this person or that person but was with the religious authorities, the imperial authorities, which is to say the structures of power and dispossession.

What's more, I'm sorry to say, the distortion of "sin" as an individual concern, and therefore one each of us need to shoulder on our own (and secretly for so *ashamed* of it we should be) I imagine rose out of the Protestant movement. Now that people, individual people, could own a Bible, and eventually could be educated so to read the Bible, this faith in practice would become much more individualized, far more so even—such that now, to some, to be a *good* Christians is not to go to church at all. The Bible is where it's at—each of us reading it on our own. So to be a Bible-believing Christian is where salvation's at all—liturgy, and hymnody, lectionary calendar and seasons of the church year all be damned.

Meanwhile, that sin is something the whole world is to work out, is to labor amidst so to birth a new creation: that's all but gone. Now it's just all your fault.

Likewise forgiveness: the notion that forgiveness is a dynamic that is to be a social force, which takes time and some intention, that's all but lost. Now, it comes to down to you and to you to come to full and complete forgiveness for any and all sin that is against you.

Which is doable when the sin against me is the result of simple limitations of time and space—someone stole my parking place at an overcrowded grocery store, someone ate the last cookie that I have been using as a reward to choke down my kale (and I’m the one who made them!) Of course, I could go back and key that car, and I could begin hiding the cookies; better, though, that I forgive the sleights and get on with my day.

But think about the really big sins, the really big offenses. We have no shortage of those these days. Think about San Bernardino. Think about Ferguson. Think about Sandy Hook. Are these really social phenomena that those most sinned against should be expected—each on his or her own fully and perfectly—to forgive? That some people in that mix might be able to is a wonder. Apparently those at prayer in Charleston, at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. church before one among them opened fire, did forgive. But that’s a high bar, one not everyone will be able to cross.

For that, I think we look to community, we look for the wider communion to make forgiveness happen. I think the work of forgiveness on such a scale as this is to be collective, communal, historical—which is to say we forgive all these damn shootings by not stoking bloodlust among ourselves but instead taking a serious and future-oriented look at the problem, it’s many causes and factors, and then take methodical action to try to prevent it from happening again, which it probably will anyway, but less and less often perhaps and with less and less lethality.

Then there’s this, we forgive as a society by making sure family members of victims of violent crimes don’t then sit on the jury that will decide what to do with the perpetrator. We’ve thought systematically about how not to propagate vengeance, and that’s for the good. We must always be watchful that we don’t backslide unto revenge.

For Christ is coming and we want to be ready, we want the world to be ready. To receive him in love, he who comes in love; to receive him in grace, he who comes in grace; to receive in mercy and tenderness he who comes as a soft, sweet baby, so in need of mercy and tenderness: we want to be ready. We want the world to be ready. We want the world that is the one as ready—loving, gracious, merciful, and tender. I do, at least. I want that world.

We won’t be ready, of course. We never really are. We’ll always be getting that two in conduct. But the getting ready is enough for now. The hope of having been refined and fulfilled to some good and useful purpose, the hope of having been prepared and straightened out that

the one coming to us might truly come: that's enough for now, for in the preparing there is a dose of fulfillment. In the waiting and watching and working, there is a glimmer of arrival. In the preparation, there is the glimpsing what all flesh shall one day truly see, the salvation of God—the healing and wholeness and perfection and completeness of God now filling the earth and the deep and the heavens above.

This afternoon we Goodmans are going to put up our Christmas tree. This is because I hope you all will come for dinner and carols on Friday night, and we'll need a Christmas tree and all our decorations out in order truly to welcome you in the spirit by which we mean to gather. We've got to ready, you see, because we've got company coming.

Thanks be to God.