

2nd Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.9.18
Scripture:

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. 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; 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. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:1-9

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 Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 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. 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Here is a poem. It's called "In Praise of Regret," and it's by Charlie Smith, an American poet still living and writing.

Somehow the longing we speak of,
the look on the young woman's face that reveals
desperation,
the way my friend gives his sadness away
like a crime he can't keep from talking about,
somehow this is representative of the best in us,
as lovely
and important as the spiky pink flowers
and the hydrangeas, a condition celebratory in itself,
occasion for gratitude this marvelous
regret, this agony
a father tries to conceal from his children
that is exactly the experience
to be brought up at the famous dinners of family and friends,
this uncontrollable sobbing
interrupting sleep, this anguish
cut on the bias and chronic,
it too, this delightful outcome, should be
given a place at the table, this honored guest
now raving among us, this fabulous sorrow,

enchanting dolor, the night sweats
and feverish cries, the exhaustion
so like repose,
this heartbreak just lifting its head,
the foolish, stupefied grin of the totally bereft,
sister and kin, the lost
and now found (foundered),
twitch and cry, the cock-eyed
consequence of happiness dashed, pale
cousins weeping in shame, let us embrace you.

I tell you this poem because today is the Sunday when we hear of repentance. Every second Sunday of Advent, when John the baptizer appears on the scene, in our strange moving backward through time of this season—when last week we glanced the end of time, and this week and next we're in the middle of time, when Jesus is grown and John is grown, and when on the final Sunday we are thirty years further back still when both Jesus and John were awaited as still in utero (which, to be honest, is what we've come for, Christmas carols, the Christmas story, angels, shepherds, a stable, a manger; but not yet), we hear of repentance—for John came proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of Isaiah.

It seems, now that I think of it, right that this notion of repentance should come to us in the middle of time, because that's when it seems most to set in in real life. I look around at my peer group, all of us now in our middle age, and it seems the struggles we largely face are due to the onset of the major decisions we years ago made, the settling into reality of those decisions of younger adulthood that were made in some measure of breathless, irrational hope. Who to marry or to partner with, forsaking all others? What house to buy or where to settle? What career to choose, or series of jobs to take? Whether to have children, and, if so, how many? All those watershed decisions behind us, now it's a matter of holding it together, making it work or accepting when it doesn't anymore, coping with chickens that have come to roost or with a bed made that we now must lie in.

If those cliché don't do it for you, though, how about this one? I have a friend who sowed some wild oats in her day. Now she's settled down, married, with children, the wife of a clergy person, in fact. I said to her once, "I bet it feels good to know you had your time out there." I was speaking from my own regret, I see now. As I myself am someone who's always been very cautious

on most every front, there are some things I wish I'd done, I wish I *could* have done—but, you know, I've always been me.

“I guess,” she said, “but now I know what I'm missing.”

“Are you missing it?” I asked.

She paused over her pizza. “Isn't everyone missing something?”

“Only those who can handle it,” I might have said, I *wish* I'd said, as it would have proved me worthy of the conversation, which I was not. The truth is I've never given much thought to regret, not until this week, when I immersed myself in it, preparing for that repentance, that regret that John insists upon. So, it comes to me now that only those who can handle it are missing something—only those who can handle the conscious feeling of missing something, the conscious feeling of regret, of repentance. Mild and pervasive as these sentiments can be, it takes some strength to admit them, it takes some resilience to let them in.

Maybe this is why John the baptizer is felt as so unnerving, even threatening. Sure, his self-presentation is a little out there. That's literally the case, as he was to be found in the wilderness. It's aesthetically the case, as (according to Mark, at least) he wore camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey. It's also the case that what he had to say, which comes in next week's reading, was pretty caustic. “You brood of vipers,” he said, and to the very crowds of people who had come out to baptized by him. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath that is to come?”

But, if he was out there, then just look how Luke situates him, a set up as if to suggest, “No duh.” “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 Lysanius ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

Tiberius, who was thought a capable emperor on the whole, but who drafted Jews into the Roman army or otherwise expelled them from Rome on threat of enslaving them for life; Pontius Pilate, who was a feckless ruler, a hollow man who never truly occupied his office and yet who would muster enough power at least, three years or so hence, to see to the crucifixion of Jesus; Herod, who liked to assert himself as king but who was in fact a tetrarch, a provincial authority, Galilee not being a kingdom but a province, and who wasn't even his brutal father's first choice for successor to power, but his third choice; Philip, who ruled the provinces Ituraea and Trachonitis

until Herod had him killed so he could take his wife and his provinces; Annas and Caiaphas, the priests who ordered the crucifixion of Jesus, and on the calculus that's it better for one man to die than for a whole nation to suffer (as if it couldn't be both, which of course it could be and would be—one man's crucifixion *and* a merciless sixty-year war against the Jews to follow) by which they (Annas and Caiaphas) seemed more politicians than priests; and Zechariah, John's father, who was himself a Temple prophet, trying, I suppose, to stick it the man but in such a way that didn't threaten his livelihood: given these thugs, cynics, and suckers, is it any wonder that young John might have essentially said, "Screw this, I'm outta here," and gone to the wilderness where the word of the Lord might finally find him?

No duh.

Is it any wonder, also, that he'd be a proponent of regret, a pusher of repentance? There was a lot here that is worthy of that attitude, shaking the head, face in hand.

As to the people who came out for a baptism of repentance—an admission into their lives of regret—is it any wonder that John might have seen them as a brood of vipers, fleeing from the wrath that is to come? Vipers, after all, do flee from fire. That's how they survive it, slithering fast away. What's more, fire serves as a regular image for wrath, it operating the way wrath does, spreading indiscriminately and reducing everything to nothing. The people then, it would seem, at least as John saw them, were sensing a coming firestorm that, given the thugs, cynics, and suckers who exercised authority over them, they were smart to sense as coming, if a bit venal themselves.

It would be felt as wrath from God, this wrath. It often is. An outbreak of human wrath can be so powerful and mysterious that it can be felt as the wrath of God. Certainly, that's a common phrase in much of scripture: "the wrath of God." But in later texts, in some of Paul's texts, it's often simply called wrath, as if the source of this sudden, overwhelming, powerful destruction is now open to question.

If that's the case (that its source is open to question), then I'd say it's the cross that creates that opening. Really, the cross of Christ, the crucifixion of Jesus, simply begs the question, are we so sure that outbreaks of punishing wrath—punishing, irrational, indiscriminate and endless wrath—can be associated with God, with ushering in God's justice?

Why, then, was Jesus so clear with his disciples that his being given over to the powers of death shouldn't serve as an occasion for the disciples to act in wrath? Really, why did Christ once

risen return to the disciples and say not what would have been obvious, “I’m back, I’m pissed, and we’re gonna get the guys who did this me,” but instead, “Peace be with you”? No, wrath serves human impulses, and the cross puts a stop to it, reveals it as an empty promise, an ultimate self-defeat.

As it happens, Malachi did *his* part to pry that question open, if not in intent then at least in effect. Prophesying to the people when they’d returned to the land from exile in Babylon, when they’d begun to rebuild in Jerusalem and replant in Judea, when they’d returned to custom, or were trying to at least, the reality of things wasn’t living up to what the people had hoped, was falling short of what expectation the fall of Babylon had filled them with. Where was the Lord, they wondered? Where were his justice, his restoration and fulfillment? There was still a fair amount of chaos. There were still hunger and need, difficulty and struggle. People weren’t universally rising to their new life but were in some cases taking advantage and looking for loopholes of opportunity to exploit. In sum, people were still people even though times had changed and things were looking up. So, when would the Lord come in punishing wrath to take care of all that?

“See,” Malachi spoke for the Lord who was perhaps speaking of him. “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple...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 a fuller’s soap.”

As you may know, refiners use fire to burn impurities out of raw metals like gold. By fire, a refiner would reduce the given substance to its most essential state, a state in which it would be stronger or more valuable, less vulnerable to corruption than unrefined metal. Similarly, fullers scour and mill wool in the raw so it can be used to make clothes and blankets and other functional things, using a soap made of lye, which is so powerfully alkaline there are now First Aid measures recommended if it were to come in contact with your skin.

This, of course, is to say that, though the Lord shouldn’t be anticipated as coming in punishment, the Lord should be anticipated as coming in force and as having the effect in our lives that’s unnerving, could be painful—for the Lord isn’t one to ordain our way of things, neither our personal ways nor our political, social, and collective way of things, but is one to bring us to the Lord’s way of things. The Lord isn’t one to bless the aspects of our lives that are corrupt or

impure, but is one to refine us of such things, redeem of us such desolating waste, painful as this process of redemption might be, *will* be. Really, the Lord is not our pet, is rather our master—and we await his coming, if wisely, with some fear and trembling because it will change everything.

This is to the good, we should know. God’s way is good while ours is, at best, good enough. But the Lord now come will also cast into full relief all that is regrettable about life and our lives, all that will cause us regret and will call forth repentance—and that could be painful.

Regret: it can be painful. Repentance: it’s not easy. This process of *metanoia*, which is the Greek word used here to speak of what John had on offer, is an endeavor of thinking again, *-noia* meaning knowledge or thinking or mind, and *meta-* meaning after or beyond. *Metanoia*, then, which is most often translated “repentance,” is to know from a larger perspective. Repentance, which is understood as synonymous to regret, is to think again, to have second thoughts. And regret, which comes to English by way of its Germanic origin *regreter*, who was the person to bewail following the death of someone else, is a process of knowing from a larger perspective, of thinking again, of having second thoughts, particularly in light of your own mortality.

It seems folly, then, to seek to avoid this process—this process of deepening insight and understanding, this process that simply admits that we will die and that has something to say about how we live. It seems folly to dodge this simple, unchangeable reality. But that’s what we do. Conduct a brief survey of available writing on-line concerning regret and you’d glean that regret is to be avoided, that to succumb to it is to be ensnared. The landscape of American self-help would have us know that regret is something you simply must let go of, that the good life is a life free of regrets.

No lesser mind than Frederick Nietzsche’s undergirds a lot of this thinking. He developed a whole theory of *amor fati*, the love of one’s fate. In his subversive autobiography, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, he claims “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary . . . but love it.”

Reminds me of a sick joke about rape.

I never saw the film *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, but I suspect, judging by its title, it puts a pin in this attitude, studies it in an ironic light.

I also find myself thinking about Angela Davis' reworking of Reinhold Niebuhr's so-called serenity prayer. A colleague recently handed me a copy of that when I was raging against something I just can't stand anymore, which could have been any number of things. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Davis' reworking: "I am not longer accepting the things I cannot change; I am changing the things I cannot accept." Both are good; both are worthy. But these days at least I prefer the latter. Then again, I've been as if standing astride history these days and just screaming, "Nooo!!"

But enough of that.

As to a life free of regret, no lesser billionaire than Jeff Bezos shows us how to do it. With his Regret Minimization Framework, he offers us a model from which we might all live lives free of this merciless master, regret. It starts with a question, "In X number of years [and you get to decide how many years!], will I regret doing this?" It's brilliant, don't you think? If you want to know more, I imagine there's a book about it, and you could buy it on Amazon. (As to Bezos' own freedom from regret, what of the brutal working conditions in Amazon warehouses and the company's crushing any hope of a labor union? How does he *not* regret that, not feel compelled to repent of that?)

Back to philosophy, I imagine his RMF (Regret Minimization Framework) doesn't even attempt to tackle the question, "How could you possibly know?" Really, how could you possibly know whether you'll regret in five years, fifteen years, fifty years, something that you decide upon today? Barring things that are regrettable right out of the gate, how could you possibly know whether something you decide now will turn out to be a regrettable decision, will have negative if unintended consequences? And if that's what you need before ever making a decision—a guarantee that you will never come to regret this—how would you set about making any decision at all, making any *life* at all? If regret is paralyzing, as many on-line self-helpers insist, then so can be the aim to be ever free of regret.

I wonder if this is some of the stress that goes along with being a kid of "helicopter parents," that if you make a regrettable decision, if second thoughts would have some move you once made seem a mistake, it will amount to something you can't ever recover from. So, watch out.

No, really, *watch out*.

But all of that is just avoiding regret in advance. That doesn't even approach how problematic it is to live in avoidance of regret on the other side of decision—problematic because it would require you never to reflect on yourself and your life, for to do so is to admit regret, to allow it in. The terrible fact that we can't live every life we'd want to live, that we can only live this one life that is ours ever before us (that is until it reaches its end), presenting decision upon decision though when we have only partial knowledge and nearly no control: never to admit any of this is to be a person who refuses to learn, to relate—and that's tragic, if not reckless, dangerous.

All this said, if we're going with philosophers to consider the phenomenon regret, I'd go from 19th century Germany's Nietzsche to 19th century Denmark, where Soren Kierkegaard was more earnest in his take on it all: "I see it all perfectly; there are two possible situations. You can either do this or that. My honest opinion and my friendly advice is this: do it or do not do it. You will regret both."

To this, I say, yes. If you're honest, then yes. If you came upon two roads that diverged in a yellow and sorry that you could not travel both, you'd have to choose one, which is itself regrettable, and then you'd have to create some story that would justify your decision, to prove its rightness, or else you'd have to admit that both would have made for a lovely walk, but you only get one lovely walk in this life. (And if you think that poem is about non-conformity and not about mortality and regret, then you have to read it again.)

For this, I aim not to be someone who feels "free of regret" but someone resilient enough to admit regret, which is to be deepened by it. And maybe you too: don't aim to be someone who never repents or has second thoughts, but someone who can be strong in second thinking, and made wise by it all. Let's not aim to be unaffected by such afterward knowing, which comes tinged with grief or humiliation or embarrassment or even deep shame, but instead to be profoundly affected, indeed made full by this knowledge of what we are, what we are not, what we might have been, and in God all that we shall surely be.

We might even start now. Following a week of reflecting on things I regret, some large though mostly small (something I've said or done that I ought not to have, or something I should have said or done but didn't), I can commend the process. We can reflect, we can regret, and we can rest assured that there is forgiveness, even forgiveness of sin, and ultimately restoration to right relationship as in the reign of Heaven.

Thanks be to God.