

Prepare Peace

Malachi 2: 17 - 3:5 Luke 1: 67-79

The candle for the second Sunday of Advent symbolizes peace. That's been a tough commodity to get hold of in these times. We've become so accustomed to horrific massacres of random citizens that even a massacre in an elementary school produced no meaningful actions from the nation's leadership. How many shootings have there been since the killing of the children in Newtown, Connecticut? More than we can or desire to remember, and there is no end in sight.

The Christmas shopping season began with a bang (excuse the pun) on Black Friday as the FBI processed a record number of gun permit clearances, over 185,000 in one day. As people presumably feel more insecure, they reach for more firepower. They don't reach for the gospel.

On the world stage, the Middle East has never been more fractured and is utterly bewildering in the number of players and different allegiances. No worries really. Most of the response from western nations has been to bomb and then bomb some more.

But the messenger of peace is waiting for the fulfillment of his time and the realization of his promise. No, I don't mean Jesus; I mean Donald Trump. He fancies himself quite highly on many fronts, and recently stated that he, the best dealmaker ever, can bring peace to the Middle East. He drew some flak for suggesting that Israel may not be serious in its negotiating. He actually didn't name any names, leaving it open that both Palestinians and Israelis could be at fault for insincere bargaining. That already ticked everybody off. Trump asserts that in a few moments with their leaders, he believes he would know whether they were serious about bringing peace or not. This may have filled many hearts with hope that a savior has now emerged. However, a bit of reflection makes one suspicious about whether someone with no experience at all in the complex dynamics of this conflict, or with any experience in delicate diplomacy, and knowing that over the last 50 years, there have been very skilled, very informed, very dedicated participants who haven't been able to come up with anything that lasts, is he a savior or a schmuck?

What we never hear about is religion as playing an important role in the development of plans or diplomacy. Yet religion is at the heart of all kinds of Middle Eastern conflicts and disputes. It is rare to hear Christian leaders in this country speak out against the idolatry of gun culture in a way that has any impact. You would think that religion, and religious voices and perspectives, are irrelevant.

In Hebrew, the word for peace, *shalom*, takes a variant in the Arab Semitic *salaam* – the beginning of the common greeting among Muslims – which is at the root of the name of the faith, *Islam*. In Christianity in this season, we await the coming of the Prince of Peace himself. All of our histories are littered with the most vicious, inhumane violence ever perpetrated, all done in the cause of the faith. Many people want nothing to do with religion of any kind because of our mutual heritage of hatred and violence,

and it's a tough argument. But God's word through much of the Torah-Law, the prophets, and the New Testament is focused on peace. Is there anything we can learn?

In reading Malachi (in Hebrew Malachi means "messenger"), we should have started with the end of chapter 2 to get some context before plunging into chapter 3. The last verse of chapter 2 says: *You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, 'How have we wearied him?' By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.' Or by asking, 'Where is the God of justice?'*

God has a complaint about his people, that they're tiresome. 'What do you mean we're tiresome,' they reply. God tells them exactly; it's when you say, *'All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and [the Lord] delights in them.'* Or by asking, *'Where is the God of justice?'* That kind of stuff, suggesting that God "delights" in evil-doers, or suggesting that "the God of justice" is absent or indifferent, is just the kind of thing that steams God's buns. God doesn't like being misrepresented, but in both comments, the complaints make the sinfulness of God's people into God's problem. God is the reason that there is no justice, and God is the reason that evil thrives. God is not happy.

God responds in chapter 3 to their complaint. It goes something like this; 'You want me to get involved in this mess you've made by yourselves. Okay, I'm sending my messenger ahead of me, the messenger (like Elijah) whom you've been waiting for.' *But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?* This may be something you *think* you want, the messenger from God, but you're going to have a rude awakening.

In vs. 3, the prophet speaks of the messenger as a refiner. Refining is designed to burn away and remove the impurities to yield a purer silver and gold. The refining is specifically aimed at the Temple priests, the Levites. That's interesting, and we can couple singling out the Temple priests for purification with achieving "offerings of righteousness, and the offerings will be acceptable to the Lord." Remember a couple of weeks ago, we discussed Malachi 1 and the rejection of the unworthy offerings. Malachi likes a theme and sticks with it.

Verse 5 moves away from this discussion of insincere and corrupt worship practices within the Temple and how to restore the righteousness of the offerings. The Levites may be purified, but in vs. 5, there is a catalog of sinners who are going to be tried and judged in the heavenly courts for their sinfulness; *sorcerers, adulterers and liars, those who defraud laborers their wages, the widow, and the orphan, and deprive the alien of justice, and do not fear me.* It's an interesting list.

The first three, 'sorcerer's, adulterers, and liars' all go together, and all continue the theme of false worship. 'Adultery' here isn't about fidelity in marriage; it's about faithfulness to your God – think of Hosea. 'Liars' isn't simply people saying untrue things, it's the faithful lying to God, lying to themselves, and lying to everyone else, having pretended and claimed to be faithful and righteous when they're engaged in insincere (liar) worship and have other gods.

Those gods they worship come in the next items in the listing, ‘oppressors of workers, widows, orphans, and who deny justice to the alien.’ There’s the alien or stranger in the land being of God’s prominent concern again. These, too, are signs of the unfaithfulness of God’s people to God’s will. These gods are rooted in greed, exploitation and indifference to the plight of those in need.

If their worship is insincere and their offerings are unworthy, it is because they have allowed greed, exploitation and indifference to corrupt. Faithful worship must be coupled with faithful living and faithful values in their social systems. God condemns their worship because the sinful corruption in their worship is a reflection of the sinful corruption of their society.

Centuries later, in the opening chapter of Luke’s gospel, the messenger returns as a subject in Zechariah’s song or psalm. Remember, Zechariah had a vision or a visitation from an angel who tells Zechariah about the special mission his future son will play in returning God’s people to true worship and faithfulness. And then he was silenced, unable to speak until his son was born. When the son is born, soon after Zechariah can speak again, and here is his psalm of praise to God.

Zechariah’s song reflects God’s people in a wilderness where enemies dominate lives and society, and hinder God’s people from their faithful and righteous observance of God’s commands. The first wilderness recollects God with Moses and the people, but the wilderness is never far away for God’s people in time, history, and space. The people of Zechariah’s time are also lost in this wilderness, living under conditions set by despisers of their God. Zechariah pleads for the salvation of God’s people.

The song comes very close to calling for God to bring forth his royal messiah, *the horn of salvation [from] the house of David*. It recalls the ancient promise to Abraham, and echoes the plea of God’s people in Egypt, that God would awaken and arise, remembering his covenant and liberating his people.

In the second section, the terms are very different as Zechariah celebrates the role for his son, John. As a prophet, John is to go into the wilderness where the people of God languish and suffer, preparing the pathway for the Lord in that wilderness. While later, John the Baptist is located in ministry in a literal “wilderness,” the wilderness is where the people of God reside in their isolation from the righteousness of their God.

John’s mission will be as a teacher and a preacher, *to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins*. John is to sustain hope in God’s people by giving witness to God’s grace and mercy, offering hope to a people that has lost hope, lost direction, and lost its way.

The section closes with words echoing Isaiah’s hope-filled vision, as the coming light from heaven *shine[s] on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death*. Turning back the darkness, the fears, and the anxieties of the wilderness itself, light of God’s promise breaks through for the people trapped and imprisoned by other powers.

This is their empowerment, their sign of coming liberation. This word from God turns back the specter of death itself that has dogged and shadowed God's people for so long.

God's people are to be guided by John into *the path of peace*, into the promise of God's blessing, as they follow the sacred light that turns back the darkness, the fears, and the anxieties that have left them lost and trapped.

We started by wondering if religion had anything meaningful to say to today's violence and destruction riddled world. We heard from Malachi who once again focuses on the insincerity of worship and the unrighteousness of all offerings when worship and faithfulness is separated from the realities of everyday life. I've noticed a rising impatience that has grown over successive waves of recent domestic violence to outright hostility. It's directed toward public officials who repeatedly "pray for the victims and their families," time after time after time, and who call for nothing, stand for nothing, and whose prayers simply amount to nothing because they are insincere, unrighteous, and idolatrous musings to a god of indifference, injustice, and weak compliance. They are an abomination of prayer. You could hear God speaking through Malachi: 'Don't pray another stinking word; do something that shows you've got a shred of faith or a bit of righteousness.'

Malachi also pointed us to the unjust and exploitative social systems that were a reflection of the useless worship of the people. Those victimized by injustice in Malachi connect easily with those *living in darkness and in the shadow of death* in Luke. Those voices need to heard, and they're not.

When we awaken and see the sacred light, we will be able to hear their voices, too. We will be healed of our deafness and blindness.

In this season when God comes again to humanity, in the form of a child, the light of hope and promise comes with him. Do religion and faith have something to say to our broken and violent world? Of course, it does, but we have to step into the light that God brings to us, and proclaim the peace that God expects us to bring forth faithfully. We need to renounce the idolatry and the complacency where we have made our offerings, and insist on the peace of God and Christ for all. This is the season to do it.