

Sermon for 5 December 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Second Sunday of Advent

Scriptures: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3 :1-6
« *God's gift to God's creation* »

All today's scriptures deal with the great new beginning God's going to pull off.

Malachi we know almost nothing about. His name just means, "my messenger," which is what we expect of any prophet. In fact, the typical picture of a prophet in the Bible is very little focused on the person, but on that person's drive to say something particular, whether people want to hear it or not. Scholars think Malachi lived sometime after the Jews got taken off to Babylon and eventually some made their way back home, but not as late as Ezra and Nehemiah and their strict rules for worship and rebuilding the temple ... maybe around 400 B.C. He preaches hope ... but also strong words about helping the poor and being honest with one another and in their worship.

Zechariah is a prophet's name, but it's not the prophet, but John the Baptist's father who was named for the prophet, that Luke quotes in weaving the two stories of Jesus' birth to Mary the unwed teen-ager, and John's birth to the elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, together, like none of the other four Gospels does...although John's Gospel spends considerable time describing John's own function as an announcer and predictor of the new thing God is about to do in someone who turns out to be Jesus.

Then Paul is quoted in today's letter of the early church to Philippi, the Greek city where Lydia and so many of Paul's supporters lived. Once again, the emphasis is on what's coming, along with a lot of instruction on how love towards each other is the central standard of a Jesus band.

When Luke finally gets our attention, as we'll be giving it for this whole third year of the three-year lectionary, he goes all out for future-talk. Officials all the way from local sites up to Rome itself are named, and we get the distinct impression Luke wants us to believe what he's describing has world-wide significance.

My point in all this is to set you up to think about your own place in history, because that's a big part of Advent's practical usefulness for serious Christians. We know a large part of getting the importance of Jesus across in the first place was convincing Jews and then non-Jews, or Gentiles, that Jesus would soon come back as God's local manager for a whole revamping of worldly existence. Since it didn't turn out that way, we have to fashion some version of the adjustment the first couple of centuries of Christ-

followers came to ... we have to use the original texts they agreed were helpful and preserved for themselves and, as it turns out, for us as well.

I want you to leave here thinking your business and God's almighty plan coincide. It's a perfect message for a mixed-up, traumatized, abusive society such as we occupy right now. I don't need to get started on parents buying guns for disturbed kids and getting charged for the murders we've heard about this week. I don't need to rub your nose in the Texas judgmentalism about who gets to have children and who doesn't, determined by a male majority of the legislature down in Austin. I don't need to remind you how near you are to the incredibly advanced years of the person you listen to preach most Sundays... You need help in feeling wise and significant, and I'm here to get it for you out of the Bible lessons for today.

First of all, ask yourself how your mind gets changed. I mean, for the better. Doesn't living with difference finally work its way into your behavior? Bad company can damage your future, I know ... we all know that, and hear about it all the time. But the opposite works much more often than we're prone to admit these days as well. What's it been like for women to get the vote? What would it be like if the South had won the Civil War?

What does it do for us day after day and month after month to read about the United Methodist Church's missions around the world, pray for their work with children and women, send them birthday greetings and sometimes hear them speak to us, as we've had deaconesses who work with prisoners preach to us, more than once?

I'll get personal and say, with a brother and a nephew and a cousin who committed suicide, what does it do for me to realize I have a tendency towards depression, and decide long ago that periods of psychotherapy and spiritual counseling are part of a healthy life-style for me, decade after decade?

I'll go political and say, if you don't pay attention to the stand your local councilwoman takes on everything from education to police evaluations, you're not being either practical or public-spirited.

The new Idea I want to get across ... as though a preacher ever has anything new to say, since we stand alone on this two-thousand-year-old Bible! ... is that, yes, God works in mysterious ways ... but if you think of it, most of them have a long string behind them, and if you follow the examples from the early church back to the prophets and the poets and scribes and kings like David and explorers like Moses and Abraham, you're likely to find patterns similar to those in the things going around us now.

This short season of Advent is pregnant ... full of promise ... with insights for those days when you think you've seen it all. You're single and past child-bearing age. You're retired, or you live with someone who just doesn't think like you were raised to. You're short of money ... or sickly ... or just not sociable ... But I'm here to tell myself, loud enough for you to overhear, that your way of thinking isn't waterproof. There are things you can contribute to, or things you can give up, that will change a child's future. As long as you have choices, you make history. Much as people tell you things won't change, they're going to. Much as what you see as set in stone is just mush underneath.

I read an article recently about a transsexual who works with people that have been molested, or been abusers, who said his firm view is we don't provide counseling and secure housing and legal assistance to LGBTQ's as equally as to people with other orientations. There is so much that can change, if we start with justice and respect and fresh housing and work opportunities ... stuff the Bible is forever talking about.

My point is that God has been working on improving reality for longer than we can remember; that there's not a stone or a star unconnected with divine purpose; that what looks bad right now is nothing compared to war or the Dark Ages of Europe, or the Roman Empire, or parts of our own family history, that have gotten better... and that improvement is connected to goodwill and fair play and ... all those Golden Rule points and Lord's Prayer phrases our Sunday School teachers thought we ought to memorize, and we did.

It's all connected. If you want to, we're here to help you get started. We believe there's backing for what we stand for. Come, join us.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.