

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Second Sunday of Advent

Year C

RCL



Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1: 68-79

Luke 3:1-6

The Collect

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

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.

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The Song of Zechariah

Benedictus Dominus Deus

Luke 1: 68-79

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;
he has come to his people and set them free.

He has raised up for us a mighty savior,
born of the house of his servant David.

Through his holy prophets he promised of old,
that he would save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all who hate us.

He promised to show mercy to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant.

This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham,
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,

Free to worship him without fear,
holy and righteous in his sight
all the days of our life.

You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most

High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,

To give people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.

In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,

To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

Luke 3:1-6

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 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.’”

SERMON

This, the second Sunday in Advent, is the day we think about the ministry of John the Baptist, but as I read and re-read the passages in the Revised Common Lectionary about the coming of John the Baptist, the phrase that kept bubbling up into my consciousness was nothing about John the Baptist at all, but, rather, the phrase, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel” from the Benedictus Dominus Deus which we recited as our call to worship.

What an outrageous thing to say to a society like the one Luke was addressing! Take a look at any map of Israel and Judah during its greatest expansion under Solomon in the 10th Century B.C. It's tiny! About from here to Lexington, north to south. Then take a look at a map of the Roman Empire in the First Century A.D. From that perspective, hear again the words Luke said to that culture, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel.”

More than just these words, hear what is behind them, the audacious belief of every Jew and every First Century Christian that there is no god other than God, that the God worshiped by tiny Israel was none other than the Creator God and Sustainer of everything, that tiny, powerless, occupied Israel had it right and everybody else had it wrong. Inevitably, every Roman hearing them do so thought they were deluded fools for anyone could see who the gods had favored. Rome was rich! Israel...anything but. What is the use of a god who can't even make you rich?

It takeschutzpah to make a claim that outrageous! Chutzpah is the Yiddish word made to order to describe the audacity of the words the Jews and the Christians were saying to the Romans. Chutzpah is the sheer gall of a man who throws himself on the mercy of the court after being convicted of killing his mother and his father on the grounds that he is now an orphan. The asser-

tions and certainty of the Jews and the Christians that everybody was out of step except them took real chutzpah!

We need to take a good clear look at the situation here. We are all of us, then and now, children of our times. We speak and think as the spirit of our time dictates that we should speak and think. There is nothing any of these first Century Christians could say to a wealthy Roman on his way to a party at his friend's house after making his sacrifices at the Temple of Jupiter as his father and his father's father before him had done that would convince him that the God worshiped by the Jews is anything other than a figment of their imagination.

Unless something remarkable happens first.

If everything in your life speaks of comfort and satisfaction, if you are surrounded by friends and worldly success and your every need is being met, it is very un-

likely that you would acknowledge that there is something wrong with something that seems so right. Indeed, I'd say that 99+% of people living in such comfort will NEVER see that something is wrong.

Unless something remarkable happens.

In the 1800's, many churches insisted on a conversion experience before they would acknowledge that a person was “saved”. A conversion experience is a remarkable event in the life of the applicant which suddenly transforms them — something like narrowly escaping being killed by a run-away horse and wagon, for instance. Indeed, the more cynical often said that the need for relating a conversion experience was the leading cause of run-away horses and wagons for a time. Insisting on a conversion experience before the church would accept a claim of salvation was an admission of the truth of just what we have been talking about – 99+% of people living comfortable lives will never come to

know their need for a relationship with God unless something remarkable happens. Made up stories of runaway horses or no, the simple fact is that God is easiest heard by people who are moved to listen because of their great need. People with both trotters in the trough cannot hear God.

Unless something remarkable happens.

Of course, those of you I haven't put to sleep yet will readily see that I'm not talking about Rome at all. I'm talking about us. Just as those First Century Christians, we have the chutzpah to speak to a culture that doesn't hear us at all. When we speak, we do it in a churchy language which is utterly incomprehensible to those who hear us. In a recent study, Americans expressed a deep disenchantment with churches over issues of being too concerned with money, power, rules and politics. In other words, we're saying one thing, they're hearing another. We're trying to say that the

world they perceive, the comfortable world that has fed them such distinguished fare, is the creation of a loving God who wishes to connect in a personal relationship, and it's downright rude and uncharitable to turn your back on so gracious a host. The people outside the church hear us scrabbling around about gay marriage and Darwinism, dabbling in politics and asking for money. Good Romans that they are they have no alternative but to consider us deluded fools.

Well, why wouldn't they? If we have managed only to make them aware of a church obsessed with money, power, rules and politics, a church which the media tells us only speaks to oppose, then why wouldn't they consider us deluded fools at best or charlatans at worst?

If we are to be understood, our challenge is to speak of the uniqueness of Christ and the Sovereignty of God in the secular language of the culture. That's not easy, church, because the secular language of the culture

doesn't allow for such things. It's like trying to speak of snow in a country where it never snows and which consequently has no word for it. The secular language of First Century Rome didn't allow for the possibility that the gods worshiped for time out of mind were delusions and that all Rome was beholden to a God known only to some rubes in Judea. The secular language of 21st Century America, steeped in the materialism that is the final gasp of the Enlightenment, doesn't allow for the possibility that an unseen God rules us all.

Unless something remarkable happens.

Materialism insists on empirical observations before it will admit any statement as true and permits extension of these observations only by the rules of logic. We can weigh a bowling ball and easily determine its diameter, weight, hardness and density. Applying the rules of logic, we can then easily work out that dropping such a thing on your foot would be a bad idea. Materialism

treats observation and logic as the entire universe of meaningful judgments; anything else is nonsense. In particular, theology and other metaphysics are pseudo-statements, neither true nor false, simply meaningless nonsense.

THAT, church, is the ears through which the secular culture hears when we speak. It is the spirit of the time. If you can't weigh it or measure it or take a photograph of it, it is simply meaningless nonsense. Life is full of things competing for our attention. We have no time to devote to simply meaningless nonsense. Speaking anything important about the transcendent God to such a group does, indeed, require chutzpah, but under most circumstances they won't hear a word we have to say.

Unless something remarkable happens.

I'm guessing that by now most of you have picked up on the fact that I'm repeating the phrase, "Unless something remarkable happens" and are assuming that

I'm speaking of the birth of Jesus, but I'm not. The birth of Jesus was certainly remarkable, but it's not the remarkable thing I'm speaking of. I'm speaking of the ministry of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. Luke tells us that John, "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". Luke further tells us that John did that "to prepare the way of the Lord so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God." What is Luke on about?

The whole remarkable business turns on this one word: repentance. We hear it and read into it some sort of vague commitment to be better people in the coming year. We're sorry that we've been jerks to our children, or drank too much, or swear so much that we were able to buy a Volkswagen from the proceeds of the swear jar we started putting dollars in last year to help us remember not to swear so much. We think of repentance as a commitment to be better people by force of will.

First of all, I don't think that is what Luke is talking about. Secondly, I don't think you're going to succeed by force of will.

I think the repentance that Luke is speaking of has less to do with being sorry that you've been a jerk in the last year, and more to do with a turning from the spirit of the times, the glasses through which everyone in our world views the world to a wider view of Creation. Those cultural glasses inform us that "... observation and logic is the entire universe of meaningful judgments; anything else is nonsense. Theology and other metaphysics are pseudo-statements, neither true nor false, simply meaningless nonsense." To repent is to reject that limited outlook, and to begin to focus upon the possibility that although you cannot, by yourself, comprehend the transcendent reality of Creation you still can rejoice that you live within it. That takes chutzpah! That takes courage!

I suppose you could take the view that Jesus don't need no help. I think you'd close important doors in that way. In our passage from Malachi we hear:

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.

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. The Jews call it “The Seal of the Prophets” but Christians call it “The Skirt of Christianity”. Christians understand this passage to be predictive of the coming of John the

Baptist, and the message that this messenger brings is one of refining and purifying our perceptions of our place in God's creation. Repentance in Hebrew is "teshuvah" and in Greek is "metanoia". Both mean to turn to a new direction or to take a new path. We are being told that we cannot perceive the coming of the Christ child and enter into the wider appreciation of our place in the cosmos until we begin to see Creation through wider eyes than those the spirit of the times grants us. It is this remarkable transformation of our perception that must happen first. We must learn that

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware¹.

That should drop you to your knees, church! Earth, this tired old troubled old world, is crammed with heaven! Every common bush and tree and building is afire

¹ ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING, Aurora Leigh

with God if we can but allow our eyes to see. Anyone can see the birth of Jesus as a sentimental favorite — a helpless baby born in shocking circumstances. It just wrings your heart, but until you abandon the viewpoint of your culture, what we used to call “the ways of the world” and view this event through repentant eyes, that’s all you’ll see. That is why John’s ministry of repentance was so vital. Without it, no one would see the coming of the Christ. They would see only a baby, or maybe not even that. These were not distinguished people.

Luke will tell you that this birth, unique in all human history, is no sentimental Hallmark story but an event that shakes even the stars in the heavens but until you abandon the positivist, materialist viewpoint of our times the best you will manage is to run off trying to astronomically identify comets or conjunctions of stars which might explain the Star of Bethlehem. You will

miss the earth-moving nature of what is about to happen just as you miss the heaven-shine in every common bush. Jesus must come to show the world that the transcendent Creator God is a living present power but that showing would be for naught without John's ministry of repentance to tell people to look for the thing that is coming.

No one wants to give up our Christmas traditions. But the very things we love — Christmas trees and crèches and presents and Bing Crosby's music — can become idols, if we allow it, luring us to see the events of Advent through the eyes of the spirit of the times. If we allow that, we shall never see the heaven-shine in the most common things of existence, like the birth of a child. Be quiet and know it is Advent. The World awaits.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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