

## Sermon for December 9, 2018 – “Repentment”

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent, Year C – Texts: Malachi 3: 1-4, 6; Luke 3:1-6

**Rev. Jeff Colarossi, Westwood First Presbyterian Church**

About this time every year we begin to hear and ask a common question, “Are you ready for Christmas?” For some that question is answered with great anticipation about the coming of Jesus, the joy of spending time with family and friends, or the excitement of feasts, parties, gifts and time off work. For others that question is answered with sadness and grief. It’s a reminder of how this year will be different, and probably not in a good way, as it may be a reminder of the past year’s sorrows and losses. For many that question speaks to busyness; shopping, decorating, traveling, cooking, cleaning and the chaos of getting it all done. Regardless of how you answer that question, whether you fit in one of those categories or offer your own unique answer, that question speaks of a particular day of the year which is, of course, Christmas Day. So every year at this time on the Second Sunday of Advent the Church asks us to listen, once more, to John the Baptist.

Whether it’s from Matthew, Mark, or Luke on this day we hear the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. John himself, however, does not speak of a particular day. He speaks of a particular **way**, the “Way of the Lord.” He doesn’t speak about getting **things** ready, instead he speaks about getting **ourselves** ready. One scholar wrote, “while the world announces preparation for a holiday John announces preparation for a way.” If this doesn’t sound a bit unsettling, it should. Why? Well, because John’s message is intended to interrupt the circumstances of our life. Like the coming of the One for which John is preparing us it’s intended to disrupt the patterns and habits of our lives changing everything that we do in the process.

At the same time, John’s message is one of hope and promise. The word of God comes in every time, place, and circumstance offering hope, peace, love, and joy. It comes to bring a new way, a new life, a new world. John points to that coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance, his words echoing those of the prophet Isaiah, **“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.”** This isn’t simply a description of the geography of the wilderness. It is, rather, a description of our **inner** landscape. With prophetic insight these words describe our life. Each of us could name the ups and downs, the highs and lows, the mountains and valleys of our life. We could recount the crooked paths on which we got lost and the rough ways on which we stumbled and fell. With prophetic foresight these words describe possibilities that our life and world can be different. It describes low places filled, the high places leveled, the crooked straightened, and the rough made smooth. These words describe both what is and what might be.

Repentance is the movement from what is to what might be. Repentance is how we prepare the way of the Lord. Human life is the way of the Lord. But God does not come in the abstract. He comes incarnate as a human being. God comes in, through and by human life, including yours and mine.

So if our life is the way of the Lord. Then John the Baptist calls us to prepare our life to repent. But not because we're bad or defective but because we're loved. God's love and desire for us are the basis of every call for repentance, but not one that's focused on condemnation or judgment, guilt and remorse, or even on saying, "I'm sorry."

Let's assume you ask me for a ride to Columbus. I agree, and we head north on 71. You get comfortable, maybe take a bit of a snooze. You wake up and start seeing signs for Pittsburgh. You say, "Wait a minute, I wanted to go to Columbus but you're taking me to Pittsburgh." And I respond, "Yeah, I'm really sorry and I feel just awful about this" and then continue on toward Pittsburgh. Umm, that's not repentance! And certainly not the message of John the Baptist. If, however, I turn the car around and begin driving back toward Columbus, then I've repented. Repentance is about getting our life turned around and heading in a new direction. It means a change of mind **and** heart. It means making a U-turn, an about face. It involves both a turning away from something and a turning toward something else. Repentance begins with examining our lives, discovering patterns and habits, ways of seeing, thinking, speaking, acting and relating patterns that blind us to who God, our neighbor, and we really are. These patterns and habits distort reality impoverishing our relationships ultimately destroying things like hope, peace and certainly love. They are things like anger and pride, greed, the need for approval, perfectionism, being judgmental, gossiping, the need to control or be right, self-loathing, guilt and despair. But, insight to these patterns and habits by itself isn't enough. We must then turn away from these old, deadening ways of being so that we might create new patterns and habits, those ways of seeing, thinking, speaking, acting, relating, ways of living that recognize the divine presence in everything. We turn our gaze back to God, reclaiming the life that is and always has been our true life. The life we were created to live. And I will tell you, wanting to do this, being aware that we need to do this and intentional in going about all this is half the battle.

What's the other half? Well, here's where Malachi, the other prophet we hear from this morning, comes in. Malachi believes we've forgotten something important, that whatever white-washed version of what God among us would be like is really a fantasy. It's not going to be Christmas-card perfection. It's not going to be "Silent Night" perfect. It's not going to be the beauty of lots of small candles burning in the darkness. What Malachi's talking about goes way beyond candles. This is the light of the world we're talking about. This is a fire that burns so hot that injustice can't stand it. This is messy and sometimes difficult. Our Christmas cards and nativity scenes don't even begin to get at the reality of God-with-us. And, in spite of our best intentions we can't possibly begin to prepare for something like this. We can't repent fully or completely; certainly not by ourselves, not without help. So while we go about this work of repentance preparing ourselves as best we can, it's really important to recognize is that as we prepare we are also **being** prepared. Or, as Malachi might say, refined.

God's messenger is coming. The messenger who prepares us to be living temples so that God can enter and be incarnated again and again right here **among** us and **within** us.

This refinement isn't easy – oh no. It's hard, often painful, and it makes us wonder if it's at all worth it. The refining fire's not a pleasant place to sit and I'd be willing to bet that none of us want to consider what it is within us as individuals or as a church that needs to be burned away. But we all have "something", something/things keeping our hearts from "preparing Him room." What do I mean? Well, a moment ago, I talked about patterns and habits in our lives, those ways of seeing, thinking, speaking, acting and relating that blind us and separate us from God? These are the "somethings" I mean. And no matter what our "somethings" might be when we're being prepared for the coming of God-with-us they'll have to go; painful though it may be.

I bet this isn't what most people think about when they think about preparing for Christmas! Admit it...you think about putting up trees, hanging stockings, wrapping presents, baking cookies....these sorts of things, right? We like to be in control. We like to make the preparations ourselves. We like Christmas to be neat and tidy and full of good feelings and glad tidings. We do – don't we? But that's not what John or Malachi were talking about, and certainly not what God gave us. No, what God gave us was something we really needed, God's own self among us. God's own son among us. God's image restored to wholeness right here, in the body of Christ and in the faces of all of us here today.

There's a story that's told of a group of women. They're studying Malachi and came across what we read earlier. They read, "**For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver**". They wondered what on earth it could mean. One of them decided to do a little research to find out about the process of refining/purifying silver. The woman promised to report back at their next meeting. That week, the woman called a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him at work. She didn't mention why she was interested only that she was curious about the process of refining silver. As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest to burn away all the impurities. She asked the silversmith if he had to sit there holding the silver throughout the whole refinement process. The man said that he did. What's more – he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. He explained that if the silver was left in the flames even a moment too long it would be destroyed. The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, "How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" He smiled at her and answered, "Oh, that's easy, when I see my image in it." I imagine that's how God does it too. So, I invite you to look around you – go ahead. Take a moment and look into the faces of those around you, those next to you, in front of you, behind you. You may not know their stories, you may not even know their names (though I encourage you to do so), but you do know something very important. Right now, as you look at these people you're seeing the image of God, the glory of God revealed. You're seeing someone called by God to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly together with God and His people. You're seeing a reflection of love so deep that it would come to live within us, sit inside the refiner's fire with us, never take its eyes off us, and never – for one moment – let us go.

Brothers and sisters – here’s the thing. What we’ve talked about this morning; Repentance...Refinement...Repentment, as I’ve called it. These things aren’t just about getting to Christmas. Heavens no. And the whole “peace on earth” thing is for **every** time, not just Christmas. It’s intended to be a way of **life**, a way of **being**. To be sure, the way to Christmas is through Malachi, through John the Baptist, through the wilderness, through refinement and repentance, but they don’t end with Christmas. It ends with the fulfillment of a promise. The promise that **“all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”** May we continue to be prepared by God’s spirit in these Advent days ahead.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen and amen.