

### **A Wilderness Messenger**

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-9

I want to begin this week with a statement about something I said last week. A listener drew my attention to one of the illustrations I used, of Orthodox Jews using their majority status in certain school districts to get elected to school boards for the purpose of lowering property taxes. From my perspective, there were two problems with this illustration. First, I had used it before. I try not to repeat illustrations; I even keep a computer file of them to track myself on this. But I labeled this one differently the second time and did not find it in my data base. Second and much more importantly, I want to state unequivocally that my repeating of this illustration in no way indicates that I harbor antisemitic thoughts or feelings. I spent much of my childhood living in majority Jewish neighborhoods, attending my friends' Bar- and Bat-mitzvahs and thinking nothing of it. My Best Man was and is half-Jewish. Linda once taught in a school staffed mostly by Jewish women. They generously welcomed us into their warm social life. At that very early stage in our marriage, living a thousand miles from home, we really needed that. I honor all sincere religious beliefs whether they agree with mine or not.

And now I wish to speak of a particular Jew—though biblical scholars agree we do not actually know who he was. In Hebrew the name Malachi means “messenger of the Lord”. An anonymous prophet used this appellation to publish the word of the Lord

without revealing his own identity. Did he do this out of fear for the backlash that word might cause? We do not know. Paradoxically, we know more about the specific circumstances surrounding his work than for almost any other prophet. From various historical details in the book scholars have pinned it to 524 or 523 BCE. The temple reconstruction following the return from exile in Babylon was complete. Time had passed since construction ended, and the expectation many had that the Messiah would immediately appear in the intact Temple had faded. The administration of Judea had just passed from the relatively enlightened Persians to the heavy-handed Greeks. George Adam Smith calls this “a dark and darkening period.”

Malachi heard the Lord telling him to tell his fellow Jews to put some iron in their spines. Tighten up the lax observance of the Temple rituals. Stop marrying foreigners who do not worship the one, true God. And go back to a high state of alert. Just because the Messiah had not come for eighty-some years does not mean he would never appear. “Behold, I send a messenger to prepare my way before me,” Malachi wrote, “and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” Note that the messenger and the Messiah are two different beings. The messenger prepares the way, the Messiah takes it. And **soon**. Hebrew lacks present, past and future tenses. Instead it has “moods” or “voices”. Malachi wrote these words in the mood conveying the greatest possible anticipation of an event yet to occur. The sense is that the messenger and then the Messiah will come **at any moment**.

**But**. “Who can endure the day of his coming?” Malachi asked. The Messiah

would purify his people with fire and with acid. (Acid is the best translation for the “purifier of silver” we find in our NRSV.) The terrible Day of the Lord brings judgment. Every prophet who speaks of it adds this warning: the righteous will rejoice upon it, but the unrighteous will suffer horribly. Prepare yourself, goes the message, before the messenger appears who prepares the way. For then it may have become too late.

Another 500-plus years would pass before all four Gospel writers would record the appearance of the messenger—and the Messiah. Luke chapter three opens with a time stamp as precise as Malachi's. Verses one through three give detail sufficient enough to peg what happened next to the year 28 AD. (An aside: if, as the best conjecture holds, Jesus was actually born in 4 BCE, that would make him 32 at this point.) Luke tells us John appeared in “all the region about the Jordan.” In chapter one Luke had chronicled that this John represented yet another miraculous gift of a son to an aging Jewish mother. He would grow into a prophet “in the spirit and power of Elijah”. Like Elijah and Ezekiel and Malachi before him, he would “turn (the hearts) of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people **prepared**.” To a people versed in their scriptures, who had waited more than long enough, it seemed incontrovertible that this John thundering forth out there in the wilderness was in fact that long prophesied messenger.

But what was his message? We can imagine him looking the people straight in the eye and saying, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?” Or: “You snakes! I regret that somebody warned you the Day of the Lord

has nearly arrived!” But like many a preacher of fire and brimstone, having set up a seemingly inescapable trap, he next offers the tiniest little opening. “Bear fruits that befit repentance!” Or: “Change your ways to conform to God's will, and say you're truly sorry for your sins!” As Luke puts it, John is “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John is warning the people to turn away from their disregard for God's will, and to turn toward obedience to God's law. The baptism part simply dramatizes this act of cleansing.

Following a warning to his fellow Jews that their membership in the Hebrew club no longer protects them from God's wrath, John concludes with the bit about the ax already touching the tree and unrepentant people getting sawed down and thrown into the fires of judgment. At long last, he means, it really will happen any moment now. And when it does, it will be even worse than the worst of the prophets' visions of perdition. John's preparing the way of the Lord consists of two warnings: the Messiah will appear before you know it, and you had better repent while you still can. Well, it turns out that God's plan would add another time of waiting and we inhabit that time. In one sense, John's warnings still apply to us. Surely the Lord still desires our obedience—and our repentance when we disobey. In another sense, we bear an even greater burden of responsibility. With the benefit of hindsight we know that Jesus came. We know what he taught. We know what he did on the cross.

In the season of Advent we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior. We like those celebrations to be filled with light and joy. And why not? We need light and joy.

But let us also never forget that we must prepare ourselves by heeding both of John's warnings. We need to do our best to obey God's call that we walk in mercy, love and justice. And we need to do our best to repent when we fail. John, that messenger out there in the wilderness, still calls to us. Listen to what he says. For we do not know whether the ax is again laid to the root. We know not when Jesus may come again. Stay ready, therefore. Heed the messenger.