

## **Advent Questions**

**December 6, 2015 | Patrick Preheim**

2<sup>nd</sup> Advent (Malachi 3:1-4, 4:5-6; Mark 1:2-8) Advent Questions December 6, 2015

This past Monday Patty and I were looking through the paper before leaving for work. We both were taken with a full page advertisement which appeared in the first section.

### **[Slide One: VW insignia and question]**

Patty and I are VW people. We have owned a Jetta and a TDI Golf. We don't drive a VW now, but VW is still our "lieblings Auto". And to be honest, we felt a bit betrayed with their emission scandal. Until my eyes scrolled down the page I wasn't sure who had placed this advertisement.

### **[Slide Two: VW insignia and question]**

Then it became clear. VW was apologizing for their greedy and reckless behavior. Both Patty and I said, "This is a John the Baptist moment". The connection between this ad, John the Baptist, Malachi and Advent might seem tenuous to some, so let me explain.

### **[Slide Three: John the Baptist]**

2<sup>nd</sup> Advent is John the Baptist Sunday, and the Baptist is all about recognizing our short comings and repentance. The scriptures for the Baptist appear every 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent. I suppose the good people who assembled the scriptures hope that the Baptist's cry of sin and repentance will snap us to our spiritual senses amidst the gluttony of Black Friday, Cyber Monday, and the various feasts of the season. The early church, and Jesus himself some would way, closely identified John the Baptist with the passages we heard from Malachi moments ago (see Chalres Cousar, Beverly Gaventa, J. Clinton McCann, James Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year C*, p.12 or Pheme Perkins, "Gospel of Mark" in *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (vol 8), p532.849). Both Malachi and the Baptist cry for a renewal in our minds and a renewal in the land. Both feel this kind of self reflection will be necessary for us to recognize the sacred one who is coming soon. Both envision that this someone will refine the precious metal of our hearts and cleanse the stains of our souls. As we continue our Advent preparations let us take a closer look at both Malachi and John the Baptist.

### **[Slide Four: Malachi]**

"Perhaps the most distinctive feature of [Malachi] is the repeated use of questions—twenty-two in only fifty-five verses (Eileen Schuller, "Book of Malachi" in *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (vol 7), p.849). The questions we ask of God and the questions God asks of us are those which train us to meet the incarnated, crucified, and risen Christ. Following

the lead of Malachi, then, allow me to share questions that have come to me as I have been considering Malachi's prophecy, John the Baptist and the season of Advent. Malachi emphasized divine grace prior to divine judgement. The book begins with the words, "I have loved you, says the Lord. But you say, "How have you loved us" (1.2). Malachi affirmed the reality that God is love and loves us. It appears, though, that the people given this good news were skeptical. They didn't perceive the Lord's love; they didn't sense God's presence; so, they reasoned, the Lord must not care about them. This situation is not unfamiliar to many we know. **So, question One: What keeps us from experiencing divine grace?**

In my ponderings I have come up with three areas which have the potential to clog our spiritual sensors. There are, for example, external conditions which fray our connection to God. The hymn "It came upon a midnight clear" identifies some of those forces which keep us from adding our instruments to the angelic harps. "[W]arring humankind hears not the tidings" of the angel choirs (#195 HWB v.3). And we all know that wars continue to rage throughout the world and through some of our homes. It is tough to meet the Prince of Peace as the gun fire rages. The crushing load of life referenced in verse four could be debt, meaningless work, no work, loneliness or any number of other things. Those "toiling along the climbing way with painful steps" (also verse four) might be those suffering with a debilitating condition of body, mind, or emotion; how does our physical and mental state not impact our spiritual compass? In addition to external forces which wear at us there is the dissonance generated by choices we make.

## **[Slide Five: I-Pad]**

I was stunned to hear the results of a recent study of media use for those in their teens and twenties. Apparently our young people, and many of us old folk as well, spend upwards of 9 hours in front of a screen a day. Sure, a good chunk of this involves work and research, but a significant amount of time is spent on social media, video gaming, and other forms of electronic entertainment (*The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens*, Nov 2015). My weakness happens to be sports. Curling, soccer, football, basketball—I do not discriminate among the children giving ample time to each. In spiritual terms it is a relatively poor investment of time. Others of us willingly sedate ourselves with Face Book, on-line debates, Netflix etc...., rather than open ourselves to God in silence, nature, or the sage words of spiritual masters. And then we have the gall to suggest God isn't speaking. Well, maybe we are tuned into the frequency of other voices.

## **[Slide Six: Cartoon]**

Or take the case of the relationship which exists between Creator, creation, and humanity. God has charged us with stewardship of the planet, not exploitation. When we willingly and egregiously desecrate the earth it will impact our connection to the Creator of the earth. This wonderful cartoon appeared in the *Star Phoenix* earlier this week. I know Les McPherson disagrees with me, David Suzuki, the Pope and many

others that climate change must be addressed. It is my thought that we are in part connected to God through the creation. When we do harm to the earth we do harm to our relationship with God. Whether you agree with the examples I have offered or not, I think we can agree that we all make choices that negatively impact our ability to sense God. The simple truth is that we often do things which hinder the connection we have to our Lord.

## **[Slide Seven: Head in Sand]**

And then there are series of issues related to our internal dispositions. We choose to be cynical rather than people of hope. Some of us love ourselves too little affecting our self esteem. Others of us love ourselves too much. Some hold grudges. And most tragic, most of us deny there is anything amiss. I offer a quote by Alfred Delp. “Advent is the time for rousing. We are shaken to the very depths, so that we may wake up to the truth of ourselves. The primary condition for a fruitful and rewarding Advent is renunciation, surrender. We must let go of all our mistaken dreams, our conceited poses and arrogant gestures, all the pretenses with which we hope to deceive ourselves and others. If we fail to do this, stark reality may take hold of us and rouse us forcibly in a way that will entail both anxiety and suffering” (Alfred Delp in *An Advent Sourcebook* edited by Thomas J. O’Gorman, p. 9). External circumstances, personal choices, our attitudes are all factors which impact our ability to sense the love of God and the coming of Christ. We do well to name those things and let them go. Jesus will help us surrender them, but we need to name them. Our ability to own the Advent of Christ, his grace and love, depends on it.

## **[Slide Eight: Who Is the Messenger]**

### **Question Two: Who is the messenger preparing the way?**

Malachi: A literal translation of “Malachi” from Hebrew to English is “my messenger”. In his prophecy he prepares the way for a new Elijah who will prepare the way for the Refiner / Fuller. In this respect Malachi is a messenger. The new Elijah to whom he refers in chapter five is also a herald for God.

John the Baptist is a messenger: The gospel writers dress John the Baptist like Elijah (2<sup>nd</sup> Kng 1.8). They have him living in the dessert like Elijah. They have him preaching repentance like Elijah. The resemblance is so great that the priests and Levites asked the Baptist if he was, in fact, Elijah reincarnated (John 1.21). John flat out denies that he is Elijah returned (Ibid). Still, Jesus seems to suggest that John was the new Elijah (Mark 9.13). This is a curious situation, is it not? The Baptist does not self identify as a new Elijah preparing the way for the Messiah, but Jesus and the early church saw it differently. Whether he liked it or not, understood it or not, John the Baptist was the messenger of Jesus Christ. This leads me to an additional category of messenger implied in both Malachi and the Gospel story of John the Baptist.

We are potential messengers preparing the way of the Messiah. Think about it: if Jesus saw aspects of Elijah in the Baptist perhaps we, too, have this capacity. Jesus comes to our various communities time and time again. Who will prepare his way? Surprised by

the risen Christ at his tomb, we will. Blessed by the breath of Jesus in a locked room, we will become those messengers. Anointed by the Holy Spirit on some Pentecost day, we become ambassadors of Jesus Christ. Yes, we too are messengers who prepare the way of the refiner and the fuller. We give testimony to the One who refines and cleans, not destroys.

**Question Three: Where does the Refining and Soap job get done?**

## **[Slide Nine: John the Baptist]**

And this is where shift focus for a brief consideration of John the Baptist. The location of the Refiner's coming is one area his message differs greatly from Malachi. In the book of Malachi the Refiner will suddenly appear in the Temple (Malachi 3.2) to give the clergy a good scrubbing. At the time of Malachi's prophecy temple worship was still at the heart of Jewish faith with much responsibility placed on the priesthood. Malachi thought the Messiah would naturally come to the temple. The Gospel accounts modify the setting of God's coming from the temple to the wilderness (Mark 1.3).

Ched Myers has written about this shift in his commentaries on Mark. "Mark 1.3...cites Isaiah 40.3, which announces a messenger in the wilderness—exactly where John the Baptist shows up (1.4). Through this deft editorial combination of Malachi and Isaiah, Mark has introduced a major theme of his gospel. It is the tension between two archetypically opposite symbolic spaces: Temple and Wilderness—center and margins (*Say to This Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship*, 6). Meeting the Messiah in the wilderness tapped into Israel's pre-temple history. Wilderness living was never easy, but it was where God's people learned about trust and grace.

- In the wilderness convicted murderer Moses found grace as he heard the call and commission of the Great "I Am" (Exodus 3.1ff).

- In the wilderness the children of Israel found refuge, manna and quail.

- On the Day of Atonement the Levites banished the sins of the people into the wilderness on the back of goat (Lev 16.10). The wilderness is where we leave past sins behind us.

- In the wilderness David found protection from Saul (1<sup>st</sup> Sam 23:14) as well as Absalom (2<sup>nd</sup> Sam 17.6).

- In the wilderness Elijah escaped the wrath of Jezebel (1 Kgs 19.4) and met God in the great silence.

- In the wilderness Jesus, himself, overcame temptation and received the ministry of angels (Mark 1.12).

All this happens in the wilderness.

**Question Four: Will we journey to the Wilderness?**

## **[Slide Ten: Cross & Question]**

With my crude photo shopping skills I modestly tweaked the opening picture I shared. This modification draws the link to John the Baptist that both Patty and I sensed when we first saw the VW advertisement. The credibility of our Christian witness as individuals

and congregations relies not upon our perfection or upon our ability to market a high efficiency product. It relies upon the fact that we haven't gotten it right, but we have found a technician who points us in a helpful direction. Integrity is confession and taking steps to fix that which isn't right. Jesus is willing to do his part, but we got to get the car into the shop. Jesus is the technician and the wilderness is the shop, so says to John the Baptist.

Our integrity depends on our willingness to make "a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves" as the 12 Step program puts it. Wilderness, purposeful empty segments of our day and week, give us time to do such hard work. And when we run across unsavory truths about ourselves and society, the wilderness gives us the personal space to commit ourselves to scary changes. Changes like once again inviting Jesus into our hearts to help us feel loved, to cleanse us from self-destructive messages, to ignite a fire for living. A fire for living compassionately with ourselves, with others, with the creation. A fire which a master refiner safely oversee.

May the John the Baptists of our time and place be granted strength for their ministry. May God grant us courage to make the journey into the wilderness that a straighter path might be made. And may the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ break upon us this day, this Advent season, and at our Christmas celebrations. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church