

# SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

by Rev. Emily Chapman

December 6, 2009

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



## ST. PAUL'S

### UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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## Lectionary Texts:

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

### Malachi 3:1-4

<sup>3</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>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; <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

### Luke 3:1-6

<sup>3</sup>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, <sup>2</sup>during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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; <sup>6</sup>and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

I have always loved the holidays. I was fortunate during my childhood that holidays were nearly always happy times, full of friends and family coming over, great food and fun memories. But of course, there were preparations. My mother loves a clean house. But bless her heart, she is the mother of three kids. And she was not blessed with three kids who liked to play quietly and not make too many messes. We

were always running in and out of the house, tracking dirt and leaves and who knows what else. None of us was the kind of kid who could just get out the LEGOS<sup>(R)</sup> or the dress-up clothes we were using – we wanted them ALL out so we could play. Even as a kid, I could not seem to understand the futility of my mother preparing for company. We had to get everything SO clean...my mom would scrub the floors on her hands and knees (only to have us roller-skate right over them), clean out cabinets that we almost never opened (only to have them refilled with more junk), and all kinds of things that I was positive no visitor would ever notice.

But my mom knew that people coming required some preparation, which is of course, what this season is all about. And this is the kind of preparation we tend to focus on – the general busyness of life, and the joy of getting to see family that we might not see too much, getting ready for houseguests or travel or wrapping gifts. Which is why every year the second Sunday of Advent is such an irritating interruption. John the Baptist arrives on the scene. He isn't the kind of guest we imagine when we clean the dust bunnies out of our houses and shove the clothes in toys into closets. He's something of wild man, having spent most of his life in the wilderness. I'm not sure that most of us, upon seeing a man emerge from the desert wearing animal skins and eating bugs, would be inclined to invite him over, or to listen to what he had to say.

His to-do list for preparing people to welcome a visitor was quite different – and much more dramatic. It's about hills and valleys being made flat and plain and all flesh preparing to see the Lord together. And, in the part of the text the Lectionary mercifully leaves out (for now, anyway), Luke tells us,

“John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’

<sup>10</sup> And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ <sup>11</sup>In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone

who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ [to the tax collectors he said] ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’”

After we all this, we might stop to wonder about how we prepare for Christmas. It’s such a cliché for the pastor to stand during Advent and rail against the consumerism that has overrun this holy season, yet when reading these texts it’s hard to imagine John the Baptist finding much recognizable from his directions when it comes to the way we prepare for the holiday. I for one, have a coat closet with lots of coats and can often find myself dissatisfied with what I have, even though I have far more than I need. It may be cliché, but we keep going – I am afraid it’s become so cliché that it’s in one ear and out the other for all of us.

It’s not just that we buy too much stuff. It’s that we have forgotten how to tremble. We have forgotten that these words are a warning, because GOD is coming. Maybe because all we think of this season is of this harmless baby born in a barn, not the Lord of Heaven and Earth coming to turn everything upside down and inside out. It’s become easy to overlook Malachi’s words to us this morning, that this messenger John the Baptist is coming to make us ready for a major change, and one that may hurt a little, at first. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way in an Advent sermon he preached in 1928:

It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming, so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God . . . . We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God’s

coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for every one who has a conscience.

Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love.

It's quite a message and one that is still very relevant today...that we must experience the terror the moment before we recognize the incredible gift. God is coming — yes, as a gentle baby, but also as the one who will judge heaven and earth — any responsible person can't help but shiver just a little at the thought of the Holy One coming into this earth that is so unjust and oppressive to so many and into our hearts that are so often filled with things that are not of God. This is what Malachi is trying to warn us about — a refiner's fire burns...baptism by fire is not a sweet moment in a civilized worship service — it's going to hurt. We've come to love our sins so much, to hold them so close that it's bound to hurt as they are slowly burned away. But we need someone to do it. We cannot refine ourselves. So in mercy, God says "I'll take care of it. All of those things that keep you from me, I'll remove them from you."

It won't be easy. Things like refining and cleansing hurt. But they are the kind of preparation we need. Because dying and rising also hurts at first, but it's ultimately for the most incredible purpose. Jesus came to be Emmanuel, God with us, to destroy our sin and anything that keeps us from being in full communion with God, to remove the evil in us and in the world and to invite to move from death to new life with him. And what joy will come when we receive the truth that Zechariah captured so stunningly in our Psalm this morning: "By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” O Come, O Come Emmanuel.