Preparing for Peace Peace Presbyterian Church

Malachi 3:1-4 & Luke 1:68-79 Second Sunday of Advent

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As a kid, I had many dreams of being chased by wild dogs, drowning in a sea of snakes, and other scary things, but as an adult my bad dreams are often about being ill-prepared. An exam for which I have never cracked the book, a sermon and I cannot find the church or my notes. This is the season of dreams and angels. Malachi in Hebrew means messenger or angel. Malachi is messenger of warning. So is John Baptist, who prepared the way of the Lord, like Malachi. But John’s father, Zechariah, was a messenger of comfort. Comfort, warning – two ways to prepare for the Prince of Peace. There’s plenty of both in the scriptures and in our faith and our day to day life. Think about messages of warning and comfort in your own life. Warning: If you do not study, you will fail this test. Comfort: You have this wonderful opportunity to learn as you immerse yourself in this knowledge. Warning: We have twelve years to prevent climate change catastrophe. Comfort: What a beautiful earth, full of resources we have been given as a gift. Within renewable technologies, solar is progressing very fast, and wind may even have larger potential. Warning: Christ is coming again one day and you’d better get ready for judgment! Comfort: God so loved the world that Christ was born in a humble manger to be the Savior of the world.

What kinds of messages transform you? Which ones do you ignore? What kind of messenger are you? Listen now for God speaking through these Holy scriptures.

**Malachi 3:1-4 (NRSV)**

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. 2But 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; 3he 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. 4Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

George Friedrich Handel knew there needed to be a message of both warning and comfort and he starts with the comforting lines: Comfort ye, my people from Isaiah. After every valley shall be exalted…. and the glory, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, then Handel moves from Isaiah to Malachi, from comfort to warning. You can hear in the music: Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of Host….He goes on. And he shall purify….For he is like a refiner’s fire…

Straight out of Malachi, words about purifying with fuller’s soap, a very strong soap. Like someone saying, let’s get out the Clorox bleach not the Dove soap, cause the fabric of your lives are badly stained, not just a little smelly. Refining silver requires fire, and the outcome is a beautiful metal, but it is forged and purified by heat. So we want God to wash us clean and make us shiny and strong like good silver, which is by the way, more pliable when pure. But we do not relish what it takes to get there. We like water purifiers and air purifiers, but those heart and soul purifiers, not so much. Nor are we as comfortable as those in Malachi’s day with attributing all our hardships to the direct hand of God. We rightly prefer to think of God working through our hardships to bring us to wholeness and peace. God is love, we read in 1 John and we see in Jesus, and that love does not wish us hardship, yet knows like a good parent, that hardship is simply part of life, and that hardship, combined with the comfort of loving support, makes us stronger like a tree that has been steadily blown by the wind, develops deeper roots to survive the storms.

Let’s hear the comfort of Zechariah’s message of peace:

**Luke 1:68-79 (NRSV)**

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

**69**He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David,  
**70**as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

**71**that we would be saved from our enemies

and from the hand of all who hate us.

**72**Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and has remembered his holy covenant,

**73**the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,

to grant us **74**that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear,

**75**in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

**76**And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
**77**to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.  
**78**By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
**79**to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The Bible is full of tensions like these, between the warnings and the comfort. It is easy, too easy to think that the warnings are for THOSE people and the comfort for us. It is too easy to think that the warnings come first and that the comfort is for those who followed some easy rule like repeating some words of trust and then got completely exempted from any warnings. It is easy, quite easy to ignore all warnings, and decide that the only message that matters is comfort. It is easy, very easy to think that the warnings are Old Testament, and the comfort is New Testament.

But I think the best way to understand the tension between the warnings and comfort is to hold the warnings within the large view of God as a God of love, whose warnings are for our protection, whose laws are written for our good, whose judgments are for purifying us, making us whole. This is the One whose comfort is not sugary sweet indulgence, but is delicious, healthy vegetables, good for us. I think God is inviting us to love broccoli and carrots, and compassion for those different from us, and justice for those who are mistreated and generosity for those down and out, and many other things that are challenging and difficult, that make us feel weak and weary, for in these things, we can prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord. This God of comfort teaches us that true comfort is not selfish ease, nor fear of judgment, but serenely and resolutely preparing the way of peace for all, just as Jesus did. His journey was not one of ease but of challenging love. Love that comforts and calls.

Love in which the warning is not a threat of condemnation, but a call to faithfulness that is always wrapped up in the embrace of shalom, the well-being which God wants us to enjoy not alone but with all of creation, working together in beautiful harmony. The God who comes to us, the Christ-child we celebrate every Christmas, is one who does not want any of the children around the world to be forsaken, mistreated, or abandoned. This God is beckoning all of us to see that the rescue from enemies includes our own personal disarmaments – setting aside old wounds, old enemies, and trying to see more clearly that God has rescued us from the miserable pain of bearing grudges and hating enemies, so that we can with Jesus, say “Father, forgive.”

Oh, the joy of knowing comfort to be a comforter. Oh the wonder of being blessed to be a blessing. The joy of seeing this house complete for our widow friend, Sulay, and this house started for the Rosemary family. Oh, the peace of knowing that despite all the messes we make and circumstances that make a mess of our lives, God still finds a way to rescue us and with our cooperation to make us whole, little by little. God trusts us enough to include us in the process of our salvation, our healing. You see the comfort is not so much that Christ magically removes consequences of sin by bearing its wrath, but rather the love we know in Christ secures us so well that it transforms our character and thus saves us from the path of destruction that we would ordinarily follow. By being comforted, we heed the gentle warnings to do the challenging work of living as generously in love as Christ, and thereby preparing the way for peace, by God’s grace active and alive in us.