

Malachi 3: 1-4, Luke 3: 1-6
Creekside COB
December 10, 2006
Second Sunday in Advent

Love Changes Directions

My least favorite subject in school was poetry. I disliked it even more than math. My childhood disdain continued into adulthood. Poems that rhymed were goofy. The poems that didn't rhyme, I couldn't understand. Why would I waste time reading something that made me think? In my estimation, poetry was pointless.

What I learned about the *poets behind the poems* led me to conclude that most of them were nuts. I *still* say that many of them are nuts, but over the years I've softened my assessment. Reading Izzak Walton's, *The Complete Angler*, I was taken by the poetic, prosaic style by which Walton probed the heart of the angler's soul. In college, I took a course called Religious Classics. I was introduced to Francis Thompson and his masterpiece, "*The Hound of Heaven*"—a poem that described God's unrelenting pursuit of us with "... those strong feet that followed, followed after."

I wouldn't say that I "love" poetry, but life experiences have helped me to at least "appreciate" it.

Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman were great American poets whose styles and personalities couldn't have been more different. Emily was shy, quiet, reserved, and seldom left Amherst, Massachusetts. Whitman, on the other hand, was a bold, energetic man who wrote earthy poems about the human condition. The Dickinson family's idea of a good time was occasionally going to the beach for a nice picnic. When it struck his fancy, Whitman also went to the beach, took off all his clothes, and ran along the beach, shouting his poetry into the wind.

A literature professor familiar with both poets posed a question. What would happen if, after spreading their red and white-checked picnic cloth and arranging the place settings and food, Whitman jumped over a sand dune and landed in the middle of the Dickinson's picnic spread? Would their surprise encounter inspire more poetry?

Today we are half way through Advent, and gearing up for the big push to Christmas. There's a lot to do between the 10th and the 25th. To sharpen our focus, we come to church to separate the essentials from the non-essentials, and reflect upon the historical fact of Christmas. The Sundays of Advent are cozy and comfortable... until Malachi and John the Baptist barge in on our picnic, scaring us half to death with their wild-eyed ranting about Something on the horizon that will soon be unleashed on the world.

This talk about, "*enduring the day of the Lord*," is depressing. With so many things going wrong in the world, why put another nail in the coffin of the Christmas spirit? We didn't come to church to hear this! Can't you wait until our shopping is done and Christmas is over?

Before you blame me, you need to understand that I didn't pick the scriptures. For a very long time now, the church has said that we must see faces in the mirror at Advent before we see the face of Jesus at Christmas.

John the Baptist's prepared the way for the Lord's coming. Luke gives a lot of historical detail as he sets the stage for John's message:

"In the fifteenth year of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Phillip ruled some hard to pronounce places, and Lysanius ruled Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John in the wilderness."

Luke isn't simply giving facts about who ruled what and when. Strong men ran the political and religious world, but God's word didn't come to them. It didn't come to the Emperor's palace or the temple. God's word came to a "Walt Whitman-of-a-man" dressed in camel hide preaching in the wilderness.

John took over for Malachi who lived 500 years earlier, who said that repentance from sin was necessary before the advent of the Lord. Malachi asked, "Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? Whose knees won't turn to jelly? He is coming with a refiner's fire and fullers soap to give you a sound scrubbing." It doesn't sound appealing, does it? It won't be a warm, Saturday night bath.

"For he is like a refiner's fire..." My father worked in a foundry all his life. He took me to watch the men pour molten metal into the casting molds. Blast furnaces super heated the ore and the impurities came to the top. It was removed and when it cooled, it formed a cinder-like material called "slag." "For he is like a refiner's fire and fuller's soap." You wouldn't bath a baby with fullers' soap. It was a harsh, strong, lye-based soap used to bleach cloth.

Preparing for Christmas with cleansing by fire and soap is not particularly appealing, but we need a bath—all of us. It is not for hygienic purposes. The cleansing that Malachi and John prescribed was the cleansing of the soul. To endure the coming of the Lord requires a spiritual bath.

I college I took a class which spent a month in Bogotá, Colombia. In our orientation we were told to shower every day. In the minds of Colombians, North Americans are dirty. Cleanliness is so important to Colombians that they will shower three times a day. It was up to us to change the image of America. But we can be "zestfully clean" on the outside and filthy inside.

Someone told me he couldn't stand listening to preachers during the Christmas season. I said I couldn't stand a lot of them

myself. When I pressed him about why, he said, “I’m sick of preachers bashing Christmas materialism and consumerism and ignoring the real reason for the season. What’s wrong with devoting a day to giving presents, offering your fellow man a helping hand, taking a Christmas basket to a poor family, singing nostalgic songs, and forgetting about how messed up the world is?” “Nothing,” I replied. “It just that Christmas isn’t a day. We don’t just follow Jesus one day out of 365. The spirit of generosity and giving isn’t about Toy’s For Tot’s, dropping a few bills in the Salvation Army bucket, or giving a handout to a street person. It’s a way of life that Jesus came to teach us.”

The color of Advent is purple. Purple is the color of repentance. Repentance isn’t feeling sorry. Repentance is taking the hard inward look at our sin, our pride, our self-righteousness, our jealousy, our prejudice, our hypocrisy, and the selfishness that is at the root of it all. Repentance is the decision to turn away from self and head a different direction—the one that Jesus has set for us.

Who can endure the day of his coming; who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and fullers’ soap. He will scrub away all of the dirt and pretentiousness that keeps us from the wonder of knowing who Jesus is and what he came to give.

I’m not sure I would call it a spiritual ritual, but at this time of year we watch classic Christmas films.... “It’s a Wonderful Life,” “White Christmas,” “The Miracle On 34th Street. One very popular type of film portrays dysfunctional families trying to make it through the holidays in one piece. I watched one Friday night—“A Christmas Story.” Another is “Christmas Vacation,” where Clark Griswold wants a traditional, old-fashioned Christmas. He wants best for his family and himself, but all of his plans turn into disasters before they can be realized.

We identify with these stories. We are not the only ones whose Christmas plans fall apart. A loved one is not impressed with that special gift you went to great lengths to find, and your feelings are hurt. You have warm thoughts about your children

while buying them gifts, and then you scream at them for something insignificant. You max out your credit card at Best Buy, and on the way home you turn off the radio when the station makes appeals to help the less fortunate at Christmas. Extended family comes together and someone says something that reopens old wounds.

I used to be a little Pharisee. Now I'm a big one. On Christmas Eve, our extended family gathered at my grandparent's home to eat and open gifts. Some of my relatives didn't go to church, not even at Christmas. I remember how superior and smug I felt when we walked in, fresh from the Christmas Eve service and smelling of candle smoke. I thought we were better. I thought God liked us more than those who didn't bother to honor him. If anyone was entitled to a Christmas blessing, it was us.

There are all kinds of grievances and grudges and grime we bring with us to Christmas. Each year we come, hoping that maybe this will be the one where everything goes right, and there will be no disappointments, and no post-Christmas let down. It can happen, but not if we simply come and behold him with better intentions.

God is not telling us to stay away until we clean ourselves up. If the cleaning was up to us, we would never get close to God's son. Only fire and soap to remove the grime.

In the movie, *Life or Something Like It*, there is a street prophet named Jack. Every day he stands at the corner of Fourth and Sanders in downtown Seattle. Standing on a wooden crate, he arched his back, threw his arms up and head back and starts prophesying. "*I see and say,*" is how he began.

A TV reporter named Lanie walked by Jack's pulpit and threw some money in his coffer. Jack prophesied to Lanie that the Seattle Seahawks would beat the Denver Broncos 16-13. He said it would hail the next day, and on Thursday, Lanie would die. Like everyone else, she thought Jack was a lunatic, but then he looked into her eyes and said, "Prophets don't joke." When the

Seahawks won 16-13, and it hailed the next day, Lanie decided it was time to repent and turn her life around.

Prophets don't joke. The message of Malachi and John the Baptist isn't, "God is coming and man, are you going to get it." The message is, "Something better in store for the world. Something better in store for us." There will be a judgment waiting for all of us. Thank God it will not be at the hands of another human being. *God* will do the judging, and God is a good judge.

God's desire is not to terrorize us, burn us, or scrub us until there is nothing left. Malachi and John tell us that God's judgment has love at its heart. God judges us to save us because he loves us. God loves us into repentance, and changing directions so we can get rid of everything that keeps us from experiencing the joy of Christ's birth.