

Runnymede United Church
The Second Sunday of Advent/ December 6, 2009
'A Time of Turning'
Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 3: 1-6

What is this time, called Advent? To a child, growing up in small-town Ontario, Advent seemed enchanted. In our oak-beamed Anglican church on December Sundays, candles flickered as Advent hymns resounded. At home, a tinny kitchen radio played Bing Crosby singing about *A White Christmas* while my mother bade me stir a strangely fragrant bowl of what would become mincemeat. Outside, the early descent of December's darkness, as I walked home from school, induced a chill of apprehension, but glowing windows in Mrs. Randall's house restored the season's shining promise. Those dark afternoons, long ago, I felt a curious inner stirring; God was somehow closer than at other times.

Others have told me that the lights of both Advent and Hanukkah gave them a child's sense of being closer to the mystery at the core of life.

The Advent of my childhood has vanished. Yet the message of Advent lasts through time: *Prepare a way for God.*

Hope is a star that shines in the night: our Advent hymn expresses this season's yearning. It is, our culture tells us, a time of frenzied activity, of shopping days counted down. Yet in Malachi and Luke we hear about another time, a time of turning from despair to hope, a time to look beyond ourselves, to get in touch with the sacred that can ground living in a mystery beyond words. In December's darkening days, that's what we prepare to remember.

How do we prepare? Malachi's words, echoing Isaiah, later repeated by John the Baptist and his followers, suggest a time of turning to God, clearing a path for God in our lives.

An important theme: great for preaching, right? Well, maybe... but do we have to deal with John the Baptist? Ministry friends often sigh about this Sunday. Many would like to avoid preaching on John in Advent.

Not surprising, really. Theologian Frederick Beuchner said that John is the one that everyone hopes will not come to the Christmas party. Dressed in clothes that Value Village would throw away, having sworn off strong drink, he rudely refuses the eggnog you've worked so hard to prepare. There he stands, sober, serious, arms folded, in the midst of your beautifully bedecked dining room. Politely, you try to make pleasant conversation: 'You ready for Christmas?' He scowls. 'Repent!' he screams. The room goes silent. Who invited him, anyway?

John is no easy focus for evangelism! “This is the time when people come out to church. They need a softer sell,” church growth specialists advise. “Forget John. Talk about angels, shepherds, the star, the manger, the baby.’ But the consensus of Christian theology is that Advent is not Christmas, that you can’t get to Bethlehem without passing through the wilderness where John is preaching. He’s the one constant for all the gospel writers: Jesus’ ministry begins with John the Baptist, calling people to repent. Consider John.

A time of turning to God. Luke knew well how difficult that turning can be, for people two millennia ago, as for us, today. Why do you suppose Luke began his story of John with that list of almost unpronounceable names, a carefully precise catalogue of power? Other gospel writers start by describing John, flamboyant, wearing skins, eating locusts. But not Luke. He begins with a list; a more nefarious company of scoundrels would be hard to find: Tiberias, the bloody Caesar of the time of Jesus’ ministry, who wanted to be seen as divine, himself; Pilate, despised, feared; Herod, unstable, dangerous, cruel; other leaders who preserved power by supporting Rome’s domination.

After his opening ‘birth narratives’ Luke begins his story of Jesus’ adult ministry by pointing to these powers: ‘Here they are, folks, the ones who ensure that even the light at the end of the tunnel is turned off.’

Then, into this history of abuse and dominance, Luke brings John, a light heralding another light, with his call to repent. Repent! That word carries a lot of bad theology. ‘Repent’, to some, means ‘steep yourself in guilt’. John says ‘Repent’ and our stereotypes surface of church as a place of pulpit-pounding negativity. Is this light?

But the Hebrew and Greek behind the English mean ‘turn back’, ‘change’, ‘turn around’, implying that the simple act of turning can bring a change of heart and mind. Repenting means beginning anew, living as if God’s reign is breaking in, so that hope and peace may abound and broken relationships be healed. That’s what White Gifts are about, today.

Back to Malachi. The people of Malachi’s time had trouble discerning God’s way. Life’s daily grind led them to cynicism: ‘Where is the God of justice?’ they asked. (2:17) Malachi - whose name means ‘My Messenger’ - responds that God is not absent. Like a refiner’s fire clarifying gold, God will transform leaders and people from corruption to integrity. They will repent until peace and justice become life’s way again.

Then there’s John. John is not easy to face. He represents everything we would sooner avoid at this time, perhaps any time, of year. John is the person sleeping on the subway grate reminding us, 2 weeks ago, that the government promised, in 1989, to end child poverty by the year 2000. John is the anniversary of the Montreal Massacre, calling us to attention. Has it really been 20 years? Are women any safer, in a time of human trafficking?

John is the voice calling us to attend to climate change, as talks at Copenhagen approach, and groups around the world protest Canada's tar sands. John calls us in the churches to protest CIDA's removal of funding for KAIROS, the pivotal ecumenical agency, which like John, has often asked hard questions.

Repent: can we hear it as a word of hope? *There's a voice in the wilderness crying... prepare in the desert a highway for our God*, we will sing. There is a place for searing, healing hope. Malachi's and John's calls to repent say: 'Turn toward God, who has already turned toward you.' Neither of them quibbles: turning is no easy task. It takes a refiner's fire or, as John and Malachi both point out, quoting Isaiah 40, it's like preparing for someone special: the roadway must be properly readied. Fill in low spots, straighten out crooked places. It's a massive project, what faces all of us today! 'Preparing the way' is not easy. But when we do it, we turn towards the centre of our living.

What is this time called Advent? Look at Luke's list of leaders; look at the one born in a stable. Which power do you choose: the power of domination or the power of love, commitment, service? Advent is a time for turning towards a different way of living, where what has power in our lives is no longer the economic, political or cultural bondage of our particular moment in history, but the sacred, moral, authority of the God we know as Love.

Advent calls us all to repent, to turn toward another way. Then, there can spring a highway for a God of wisdom more profound than my questions, of love deeper than my pain, of light to fill the tunnels in which we find ourselves, a God who turns to me even as I turn in my wilderness.

Advent says: let us turn, let us make a way to care, to share, to reach out. Our turning time has come.

As Madeleine L'Engle wrote in her poem, '*First Coming*':

*...God did not wait
till hearts were pure. In joy, God came
to a tarnished world of doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
God came, and God's light would not go out.*

Lillian Perigoe