

## The Wild Side of God

Korleen and I got engaged in Vancouver over the Christmas holidays. I was a Bible School student and Korleen was teaching High School, so we had a few free days to search for the ring. After several days, and by now it was Christmas Eve, we had yet to find *the* right ring. We were staying with old friends of my family, Charlie and Kathleen Skimming, who were from Glasgow and were as Scottish as the day is long. Finally, after a Christmas Eve's morning of ring shopping, we returned to Skimming's apartment. Kathleen says to Korleen, "What? No ring? Come on Korleen, you need to put him out of his misery!"

So after lunch Korleen and I went out again, just across the street to the big mall in Port Coquitlam, and we finally found the ring in a jewelry store. Then we came back to the apartment and got ready to go to Skimming's church for Christmas Eve service. When we were all dressed up and ready to go, Charlie says to Korleen, "Well, where's the ring? We want to see him put in on you!"

Korleen said, "Well it's not Christmas Day. It's a Christmas present."

To which Charlie replied, "Ah, but it's *already* Christmas Day *in Scotland*."

And so it was.

So we put the ring on, and off we went to church.

To the Old Testament people, God made a promise. It was a promise yet to be realized, but from the very beginning God told Adam and Eve that he would *send someone* to "crush the head of the serpent." He would send *someone*. It was a *promise*. And if you reflect carefully on all the other promises God makes in the Bible, they all point in the same direction to this "Promised One." And in the fulness of time, Jesus came. But even from the *beginning*, that promise was already fulfilled *somewhere*. Already fully realized *in heaven*, but not yet on earth. And even today, the nature of God's kingdom in this world is that it is both already here, but not yet. A promise *kept*, but not fully realized.

But it will be.

The prophet Malachi said that the Messenger of the Covenant would come to the Temple. It was a promise. In Advent season, we realize that promise still stands. He *will* come *again* – this same Jesus. And this promised coming was incredibly important for Malachi's people to cling to considering . . . .

## The shallowness of human culture

The prophet Malachi lived and spoke sometime after the Jews return from Babylonian exile, but before the dramatic reconstruction great spiritual renewal that took place under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. After their repatriation to their homeland under the Persian emperor Cyrus, the initial excitement the Jews felt about renewing their spiritual connection with God soon began to wane. The tough part of the exile was over. The recovery was well underway. Things were going pretty smoothly – at least for the ruling elites in Jerusalem. They were busy building new houses. Making money. But then comes the prophetic voice of Malachi. The Spirit within this man can no longer remain silent about a priesthood that is becoming increasingly ignorant of spiritual life and eagerly grasping at the new-found wealth. The spiritual dimension of national reconstruction was taking a back seat to growing the economy.

Nevertheless, the prophet brings *Good News*. God will act to save. He still *promises* to come to his Temple. There is the hope of the coming *Messiah*. But Malachi's is not altogether a *joyful* expectation of Messiah. They must *prepare* with a deepening of their spiritual lives - a

repentance that brings *justice* to the weak and poor, widows orphans and foreigners among them – to those left outside of the recovery. Malachi calls for a *purification* – especially among the priests. But Malachi also intends his message not just for the day in which he lives and shallow lives around him, but intends this message to ring into future generations. It's for *us* who today wait for the LORD.

The Advent and Christmas season can be a wonderful *cultural* holiday that *anyone* can enjoy without encountering the *Christ* of Christmas. The question that Malachi raises to us is “how much real spirituality are we actually experiencing in our day to day lives? Could we have merged so thoroughly with the unbelieving culture around us that our “worship” is mostly merely pretending? The prophet Malachi would warn us today that we should be *most* on guard, *not* against that which is patently pagan – other religious traditions – but against that which presents itself to us as very much a *Christian culture* but is shallow and conceals just beneath it's surface a whole range of compromises in Christian belief and behaviour.

Of course the only safeguard we have against this kind of shallowness and compromise is the same as it was for Malachi and his community: we are here today to gather into a *communion* at the Lord's Table where we are both held accountable for the truth of Christian faith and transformed by the presence of the Christ.

Our text in Malachi addresses the question of where is the justice of God in our world? Where is the power of God to transform human society? Does our giving in this season reach to the very poor the very wounded and helpless in our world? Here in the modern West we seem to see Christian influence grow more shallow with each passing Christmas. Christmas can become a stressful time – even depressing because the actual *message* of Christmas can be lost to us under a thick cultural overgrowth. But what the biblical prophets do for us in Advent is. . .

### **Clear the jungle**

"I will send *my messenger*, who will prepare the way before me."

It's interesting that the Hebrew name *Malachi* actually means “my messenger”. So the prophet saw *himself* as one calling his people to get beneath the surface of religious ritual to receive a deep authentic work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me." This verse first enters the testimony of the early church in the birth story of John the Baptist in Luke 1. Jesus would later confirm that John, *was* in fact God's messenger preparing the way for the coming Son of God. These words of Malachi were very important to the early church to impress – especially upon the Jews – that what God promised to Israel from the beginning was continued and fulfilled in the life of Jesus Christ.

But even today, we are not finished with the Old Testament prophets, you and I. There's always an openness in the witness of Holy Scripture. It is a *living* Word. There's no one-time final fulfillment, but always room for new future fulfillments. So the prophet Malachi is giving us . . .

### **An opportunity for a fresh encounter with God**

“Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. “

Malachi invited the people to “put their God to the test”. He tells them to “bring the full tithe into the storehouse, and see if God will not pour out a blessing on you.” (The tithe, of

course was referring to the portion of their harvest that Israel gave as an offering to God) But I would suggest to you that Malachi was speaking of the tithe *metaphorically*. He wasn't really talking about making a big offering at the Temple. He was speaking about committing to God's work with all our being.

For Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, a "*day*" was coming. We know *now* in the fuller light of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ that there is a genuine, personal encounter men and women must have with God. The Lord must come into each heart *as if it were a Temple*. He must enter our lives and be and be our God and King. And we must commit to him with all our hearts.

We live in a multi-faith society. This means that if we want to address those around us with evident spiritual power in our lives we must be willing to take the searching questions Malachi raises and address them to the issues of addiction, family dysfunction, shallow and irrelevant worship, materialism and the responsible stewardship of our bodies and even of our *planet*. For there is a day when we will give account for these things. The LORD must come to his Temple. And we *are* the Temple.

**Mal 3:16** – Jesus said, "Do this is remembrance of me." We come to the Table today as those who revere the Lord. But we can never come here on merely a superficial level. We must be able to communicate with each other at the deepest and most authentic level. But the promise is that, if we do, the Lord will take note and listen to us. But we will find in this encounter with God at this table something of . . .

### **The *ominous* nature of God**

Malachi continues, " But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?"

Jesus, of course, taught us to approach God as our *Father* – one committed to care for us and provide for us, one with whom we can have an intimate relationship. He is God of mercy and love. But the metaphor of God as Father also poses a bit of a problem. In the Old Testament thinking of Jesus, calling God Father was not so much about familiarity, but of a formal, social relationship of respect. When we consider the witness of the prophets we encounter a quality in God that cannot be domesticated. There is part of God that is untamed and awesome.

There's a scene in C.S. Lewis' book "The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe" where the children are hearing for the first time of Aslan the Lion, the king of Narnia and the allegorical Christ figure of the book:

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he--quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "*if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else silly.*"

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Malachi invites us to experience the *wildness* of God, because it is only in experiencing the untamable nature of God that we will undergo a . . .

### **Transformation**

“For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.”

What's a process like that like in human terms? Well it will be different for each person. God refines and purifies us in many different ways. About the only thing we can expect is that will not be exactly what one expects. Malachi see the renewal of hope in his nation beginning with “the Levites,” the priestly class of Israel. The priests are the ones who must be purified *first* in order to be ready to bring the people to God.

In the NT church, of course, there is a priesthood of all believers. The church, says Peter, is a “kingdom of priests” Each and every Christian granted direct access to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. The Church of Christ, like the Levites, must be purified in order to bring this world to the knowledge of God through the preaching of the Gospel.

Now here's the fascinating thing: The process begins with a dramatic fulfilment of Malachis' words in the life of one *particular* Levite named Zachariah.

In Luke 1 we read, “In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a *priest* named Zechariah, who belonged to the *priestly* division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was *also* a descendant of Aaron.”

What's significant about these two is that they are the *Levites* of whom Malachi speaks. As Zechariah offers incense in the Temple he is greeted by the angel Gabriel who announces that in their old age he and his wife Elizabeth will have a son who they are to name John, who will be greatest of all prophets and will announce the coming of the Saviour of the world. But Zechariah is not ready for this – no one is. As godly as they are, these Levites are UNPREPARED. So Zechariah is struck mute – can't speak a single word for months and months until the birth of his son John.

But during those silent days he is being *purified* within. His mind is dwelling on the *promise* made to Abraham and the *pregnancy* of Mary with Jesus that he is witnessing in his own home. The God of forgiveness and tender mercy is coming into the world. This is the turning point of all history. His purification was unlike what one might have expected from Malachi words. It was not the blast-furnace of a wrathful God, nor the relentless pounding of fists as an ancient launderer might do smacking a garment upon a rock over and over until it is clean. No.

Such a strange refining fire it was: just a little candle brought into a stable to illumine a peasant woman giving birth. Just a little laundry soap to wash some clean linen to wrap the newborn in. Yet this Baby, this Jesus, is not a tame lion. In this child all the ominous untamed nature of God. And it is through him alone that we are able to give our lives to God, purified, as.

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### **Acceptable offerings**

So Malachi says, “Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. “

The Christian life will never give us anything near sinless perfection. Our lives will

always be full of unfulfilled expectations. But nevertheless *we can find acceptance* with God. Whatever failings and faults you and I may have today, we must live in the moment. We must seize the day. We must encounter the relentless wildness of our God. And we must do so always bearing in mind what lies at the heart of kingdom living: the message of the cross. Could there be any more untamable expression of love?

The Gospel is unchanging, but we may not be able to express it in the outdated abstract, conceptual language of the modern era. In other words, our culture may actually be what is getting in the way.

So we are thrown back on the Scriptures. Tales of angels appearing, miraculous pregnancies and birth. Pretty wild stuff. We can still tell this story visually, and in spoken word – something that brings us closer to the wildness of God than the overly abstract language of modern theology. What matters, after all, is a transformation in our lives. What matters is having an encounter with the living God. What matters is the Scriptural revelation which prevents us from descending into the endless cycles of nature worship – making God in our own image- as if he could be tamed. Human history is going somewhere. God is doing something, and there's nothing we can do about it except join him in his wild adventure.