

Rejoice in God's Righteousness

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-18

December 9, 2012

Second Sunday in Advent

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green

You heard the Old Testament scripture. When God comes, it will be like a very hot fire. That's why I brought a picture of a blowtorch as an ornament for our Christmas tree! And when God comes, it will be like a good, strong scrubbing. Which is why I also brought a bar of laundry soap as an ornament for our Christmas tree.

The Lord is coming. Get ready. He is like FIRE and SOAP. That's Malachi's prophecy in a nutshell. We read it during Advent and, like the apocalyptic end-of-the-world scriptures from last Sunday, it's supposed to help us get ready for Christmas. But it's not very festive.

Outside of this room, I don't see anybody else decorating their Christmas trees with little bars of laundry soap, do you? No little blow torches or fiery furnaces either.

Here is a random sampling of last year's Christmas cards, which shows the following: Santa, snowflakes, an angel holding a lighthouse, somebody's baby picture, a penguin on ice skates, and a charming village scene. Not a single refiner's fire in the stack. No fuller's soap, either.

That was the Old Testament reading. What about the New? What about John the Baptist, eating locusts and wild honey, wearing a camel hair shirt, out there in the desert all revved up and wild-eyed?

Let me check my stack of old Christmas cards. Hmm, let's see... Nope. Not a single John-the-Baptist card in the stack! And who can blame Hallmark for that? How many of you would send: "*Repent!*" cards to your family, friends and business contacts for the holidays?!

We wouldn't want to dampen the "holiday spirit" would we? People want to have themselves a merry little Christmas, with elves, candy canes, and eggnog.

Do you see the irony here? Themes and images that are central to a Christian understanding of Christmas are sidelined—are virtually ignored--in favor of something else that everyone calls "the Christmas spirit."

Allow me to set the record straight. The advent or “coming of the Lord” is not cute or charming. It is not merry and bright. It is way, way WAY better than that.

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I remember the first time I got poison ivy. Has anybody here ever gotten poison ivy? Newly married and excited about putting in a vegetable garden one fine spring day, my husband Carlos and I chose an overgrown patch of earth to clear. With visions of zucchini and tomatoes dancing in our heads, we turned over the earth, dug all day up to our elbows in the dirt yanking out “weeds” and “vines” by the roots, wiping the sweat off our brows...

We didn’t feel anything until about 7:00 that night, and by the next morning our skin was streaked with red lesions bubbling up into blistery welts. Not just on our arms but our legs, too, and even our faces, where we had wiped off the sweat and brushed the hair out of our eyes. The itching I can only describe as unbearable.

That’s when I bought my first bar of Fels Naptha laundry soap. “Use it to shower with, and even shampoo,” a friend advised us. “It’s the only thing strong enough to wash off the sticky oil from the poison ivy.” And so I did.

When God comes to us, it will be like a good scrubbing down with Fels Naptha laundry soap. God is the only thing strong enough to get rid of what sticks to us and causes us to suffer. “He is like fuller’s soap,” says the prophet Malachi.

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And when God comes to us, Malachi also says, he will be “like a refiner’s fire.”

One thing you will learn about me is that I am a huge fan of our National Parks in this country. A few years back, our family went to Yellowstone National Park for a vacation. While there, we saw the geysers, hot springs and grizzly bears, and we also drove through huge swaths of land that had burned in the huge forest fire of 1988. Do you remember hearing about that fire? The first spring after the fire, National Geographic ran a series of photos showing the burned areas blooming with wildflowers, carpeted with the inch-high sprouts of a new generation of woodlands. Those tiny seedlings that sprang up immediately after the fire of 1988 were 20 years tall when we visited Yellowstone! We saw them.

We learned from the Park Rangers that forest fires create open spaces that are the preferred habitat of some of the smaller forest creatures. We learned that forest fires control the spread of insect-borne diseases. We learned that after decades of Smoky-the-Bear campaigns to prevent forest fires, scientists now argue that fires serve important functions in the eco-system of a forest. It takes

the high heat of a forest fire for the pinecones that grow on the famous “lodge pole pines” in Yellowstone to open up and drop their seeds onto the forest floor.

When God comes to us, it will be like a good fire, a fire that burns to preserve, that burns for a purpose, that burns to save and to set things right. The message is stern. The images are stark. But the news is good.

When God comes it will be to clean this place up, to get rid of what is bad for us, so that what is good for us can flourish. Kind of like chemotherapy—attacking the cancer cells to obliterate them. It’s hard on the body. But those who are cancer survivors thank God for their chemotherapy. It is what saved them.

There is nothing merry or jolly about chemotherapy. Could it be that there is nothing merry or jolly about the coming of the Lord? Any of us would welcome chemo if we needed it. Shall we not also welcome the coming of the Lord?

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How shall we welcome him? How shall we welcome the One who comes to scrub and burn?

John the Baptist said, “Repent!” And he quoted the prophet Isaiah, who had said hundreds of years earlier, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

Both John the Baptist and Isaiah before him were preaching to oppressed people, Isaiah during the Babylonian captivity, and John the Baptist during the Roman occupation of Palestine. Both announced that God would come to clean things up, get things right, straighten things out. And they suggested that God’s people might want to get ready for that by cleaning their own stuff up, getting their own relationships right, and straightening up their own messes.

God’s coming would have been welcome news! It meant that God had not abandoned them. It meant that God still cared about God’s people exiled in Babylon. It meant that God still cared about God’s people living under the humiliation of Roman occupation, beholden to Caesar and his minions. God cared. God was coming. God’s purpose in coming was to set things right. So, everyone should get our own houses in order, and prepare for God’s coming. It was marvelous news!

What I am doing here today is basically just another rewrite of Isaiah and John the Baptist. I am re-preaching their sermons. The big difference between then and now is that you know something that their listeners didn’t know. You know that God actually did come. You know that Christ was born, that he lived, ministered, died and rose again. You know that he is present in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

You know that don't have to go out and find God. You don't have to go somewhere to get religion. God comes to you! Where you are! Where you live and work and worship!

So all I think I need to do is remind you to be ready. Prepare. Prepare an easy path for God. You can block God's way, or you can open God's way. God approaches, but **an action** is required on your part or God will always only be approaching and will never actually arrive.

And what is that required action? In a word: repent. We prepare a way for God *by repenting*. The Protestant Reformers described repentance as "the true turning of our life toward God."

John the Baptist illustrated this "true turning of our life toward God" with concrete, practical examples: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none." And whoever has more than enough food should share it with the hungry.

Repentance is the true turning of our life toward God, toward others and especially toward the poor. Words alone do not constitute repentance. It is one thing to recite a pre-printed Prayer of Confession along with every body else during worship. Saying we are sorry for our sins is important, but God is looking for something beyond that. God is looking beyond words to actions.

God isn't interested in our feelings of sorrow and remorse, and by that I mean God isn't interested in making us feel bad. God is interested *what we do*. God is *excited* about the concrete and practical things we do for others: "anyone who has two coats must share with anyone who has none." That's the kind of repentance God is going for.

All of this preaching from John the Baptist, and Isaiah before him, and from Malachi, points to a single attribute of God, what the Bible calls *righteousness*. God's righteousness. God is concerned with *making things right—or fair*. God enlists us as recruits to that mission--that mission of *setting things right*.

When God comes, God comes in righteousness. When God invades, the world experiences it as a good scrubbing down, a divine forest fire, heavenly chemo.

We can welcome God's righteousness by participating in it. Rejoicing, we can wash ourselves inside and out. Rejoicing, we can make different choices. Rejoicing, we can stop doing the things that are bringing us down. Rejoicing, we can work in the world for peace with justice and we can treat the poor and the meek with the dignity that belong to them as children of God.

Advent is the season of Repentance. Repentance is the work of Advent.

Advent and Repentance—they always go together. God is *always* approaching us and therefore we are *always* repenting. Which means we are also, always, *rejoicing*.

To the glory of our righteous God, who is Emmanuel, God-With-Us.
Amen.

~*Ruth L. Boling*