

Malachi 3:1-3 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Coming Messenger

3 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.² But 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.

Luke 1 - The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty,⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord

and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to

them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

The Birth of John the Baptist

⁵⁷Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." ⁶¹They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name."⁶²Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Zechariah's Prophecy (TO BE READ)

⁶⁷Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior^[g] for us
in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰as 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.

⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon^[h] us,

⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace."

⁸⁰The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

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Luke 1: 67-80 Malachi 3:1-3

“A Prophetic Legacy – Uncle Zack’s Silence is Broken”

Kerra Becker English

Will we ever change? Can we change for the better or are we stuck in a perpetual cycle of violence? Is our destiny really one of love or are we marked forever as the kind of creature that can't help from killing his own brother after being kicked out of Paradise? I know that question has been on my mind this week as two mass shootings happened on Wednesday bringing the 2015 total number of shootings to be more than there have been days in this year. Our death by guns rate in this country is astonishing. But it isn't the only bad news out there. This is but one problem in a whole array of societal problems: violence, hatred, poverty, war, all the kinds of things that paralyze us with fear and anxiety, and leave us feeling both helpless and hopeless to change for the good.

What are religious people to do in such a time as this? It's a pretty good question, but it certainly doesn't bring to mind any easy answers. Sadly, religion is often used as a reason for claiming superiority in our pluralistic world rather than promoting peace or living into the vulnerability of loving our neighbors. All the monotheistic religious practices, and specifically I'm thinking about Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, have their adherents for whom eradication of the other has become their religion. Some claim, in the name of whatever brand of faith they so choose, that their God is the ONLY God or that God loves them best because they have all the right answers. This starts more trouble than it solves, for when this is the case – violence toward the other is justified, a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots is inevitable, and hatred becomes the norm. One may claim to “love your neighbor” in this type of religion,

nevertheless, the goal then is to judge him, convert him, or else annihilate him if he has become an enemy of God. The internal logic is there, we've all seen it, and yet, I find such logic absolutely appalling.

But being suspicious of people who are "not like us" is not just a religious problem; it's a human problem. We haven't evolved quite so much from our tribal ways as we'd like to believe. I want to say that because oftentimes it is assumed that a characteristic of people of strong faith is that they will not do well with differences. There are plenty of times that would be true. And yet, what this means is that being religious is often confused with religiosity or dogmatism. It leaves a lot of people of deep faith wondering how to move forward. On one hand, we don't want to water down our faith because it has been life-giving for us. To deny Christ because of all the atrocities done in his name doesn't seem right. But on the other hand, we don't want to be associated with a brand of religion that is just tribal self-importance masquerading in religious clothing.

So really then, what ARE religious people to do in such a time as this – when a variety of fundamentalisms, dogmatic interpretations, and hateful actions operating under the guise of religion are what dominate the headlines of the day? We might want to deny that religion has anything to do with violence, war, prejudice and greed, but I'm afraid we don't completely get to take that pass. If we don't speak up and speak out with an alternative, what choice do people have but to lump all Christians together in one mold? I know that Muslims in this country in particular are feeling that pressure immensely. They have to be terrified anytime someone who looks Middle Eastern picks up a gun and decides to show a threatening opinion with it.

Does our tradition have anything to offer? What have we done before? What could we do now?

We have to be reminded. We have to be reminded, over and over and over again that the purpose of religion is not to figure out who's in and who's out of the club. When this becomes the popular interpretation of religion, we must return to the prophetic tradition within our faith. When we get to thinking too much along that "insider" track – God will send us a prophet or raise the prophetic voice within in order to remind us that we are not the only ones God loves on this planet. It has happened before, and I suspect even when the prophets don't have holy books written about them, the prophetic voice still has a role in righting our relationships.

So what exactly happens when a prophet challenges our "insider" thinking? Are we grateful or are we offended? What if it has always been God who consistently and repeatedly reminds us to come back to center when we've gone too far down the path of protecting ourselves to the detriment of our brothers and sisters?

If there ever was a time for us to look back to in our faith tradition for help and healing and hope, maybe, just maybe it would be the time leading up to Jesus' birth. Then too, scary things were happening in the world. There's an anxious King who would rather kill boy babies than get dethroned. The religious authorities are circling the wagons around long lists of laws and decrees. The Roman Empire has grown powerfully expansive, and the Hebrew people, though not enslaved, have very little authority or autonomy, even in their own land. Taxes are

high. Military conscription is often mandatory. Not sure what is going on in terms of personal satisfaction, health, and well-being, but it seems to be a challenging time in which to live.

In the midst of that situation, the old prophecies speak with new vigor. The words of hope come to fruition. The messenger of the Lord, the prophet of the Most High God will come to purify the nation. The Messiah will be born of the Davidic line. And Jesus' Uncle Zach, who was silenced by an angel for the duration of his wife's pregnancy, has his lips unsealed at the birth of his child, a son whom he will name John. His silence prepares him for an amazing speech. He unleashes a vision that will be a restoration of hope. Why is it that contemporary prophecies always sound so apocalyptically bad? Scriptural ones are not so. They talk about God's tender mercy, God's absolute and unfailing love, rescue for God's people, and peace.

Yet in times when we have grown cold-hearted and distant from the other, the prophetic truth can sting. It means change, big change, and that change might have to begin with us. I think for Uncle Zach, the silence was a time of great pondering. We cannot imagine peace in our world when we're paying too much attention to the chaos. Sometimes the best thing for us is to turn off the news and tune out the 24 hour cycle of pain that keeps us anxious and afraid. As I read this week on the Momestary blog, one of my favorites, perhaps we are being drawn to be still before we can take any action. It's not a new idea, but in that same piece Glennon Doyle Melton reminds her readers that: *Stillness without action is not compassion. It's more like pity.*

Compassion means your pain into my heart and back out through my hands. And that...

Action without stillness can't be trusted. It has no wisdom, no steadiness, no plan. It's reckless.

It's oil on a fire.

Maybe, just maybe when God seems most silent it means: a new thing is about to happen, the people will be comforted, justice will roll down like waters, and people will begin to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly. Maybe, in this season of mistrust and confusion, God will be born into the world with a promise of love and hope for now and for all future generations.

But the truth is, I don't know. I began this sermon with a question. Will we ever change? And I don't know the answer to that question – mostly because of the word “we.” Who is the “we” and how much “change” is change? The prophecies of old were not so specific. They spoke of change for God's people, and we know now that “God's people” really means everybody, not just us. God is Lord not only of our lives, but our God loves strangers, it says so quite early on in scripture in case you haven't heard. Will “we” rise above the nature that keeps us fighting in perpetuity? I'm not sure we'll see that kind of peace to rule the world, but I can catch glimpses of it out of the corner of my eye, and I can listen to it over and over again in scripture, and I can be assured of its possibility because I read and feel the stories alive in me, as they were in generations long ago.

So today, if you need some hope, go home and read the whole first chapter of Luke, read a few prophets, call to mind your favorite Jesus stories – after you've silenced your phone and shut off the TV. Allow Uncle Zach to disturb and disrupt the chaos of the pre-Christmas season with a different kind of message, one that proclaims God's tender mercy! Remember that he kept vigil in silence so that he could raise a mighty son who would raise some hell. John the Baptist really did preach the hell out of everyone he met. Because he knew his Father's love and the Father's love, he could be assured that repentance was possible, so much so that he could baptize the Messiah for the rocky journey of letting the hatred that was prevalent in the world at that time

kill him so that by his resurrection we would know, really know that love is far, far more powerful than death.

Jesus, because of his crazy Uncle and even crazier cousin, is part of this prophetic hope and vision that all will know the love of God, intimately and securely, even in, or maybe especially in those times that God's voice goes quiet and we become afraid.

There were way too many things I wanted to put into this sermon, so, here are some Resources for an ongoing conversation:

Listen to the **Radiolab** podcast: "Update: New Normal?"

Or read Brian McLaren's, [Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha and Mohammed Cross the Road?](#)