

Malachi 3:1-18

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. ²But 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.^[a] ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

⁵Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

⁶For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. ⁷Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, "How shall we return?"

⁸Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings! ⁹You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! ¹⁰Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. ¹¹I will rebuke the locust^[b] for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the LORD of hosts. ¹²Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.

¹³You have spoken harsh words against me, says the LORD. Yet you say, "How have we spoken against you?" ¹⁴You have said, "It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as

mourners before the LORD of hosts? ¹⁵Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape.”

¹⁶Then those who revered the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the LORD and thought on his name. ¹⁷They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them. ¹⁸Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

Luke 3:1-20

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler^[a] of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler^[b] of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler^[c] of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” ¹¹In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,^[d] ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.

He will baptize you with^[e] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹But Herod the ruler,^[f] who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

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Malachi 3:1-18; Luke 3: 1-20

“Don’t Shoot the Messenger”

Kerra Becker English

The messenger. It’s not a role many of us want to have. The bearer of bad news. The one who calls out the bull, and tells you exactly what stinks about it. This person speaks the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth – no sugar coating to make it easier to swallow. The messenger points out precisely what we’ve been doing wrong, and demands that we make it right. He or she cares more about the outcomes of justice than about our feelings. They aren’t out to win any popularity contests. Nor are they interested in gaining worldly power.

Messengers don’t make easy friends. Sometimes messengers get fired. The biblical messenger John the Baptist gets beheaded.

But without the messengers, the honest to God message would never get through. The message has to be the important thing – maybe even more important than one’s life. But when does that come into play exactly? How do you know which message is THE message, and will you be given a sign as to when to pronounce it? Are you willing to be a messenger of the sacred truth if God asks that of you?

Pastor-types struggle with those questions – because it is at least a piece of our role, and yet it isn’t often mentioned in the job description or the form used for congregations seeking a pastor. Congregations don’t say in their call forms, “We need a pastor who readily tells us when we are wrong, and who will call us to repent and truly live out the gospel in our own lives. Only bold clergy

need apply!” So, if you ever see anything like that, please tell me about it! I want to meet people in that church to see if they are genuinely looking for transformation or just don’t quite know what they are asking. I don’t know a lot of pastors who would respond to such a vocational description anyway because rather than seeing themselves as those bold truth-tellers, most clergy tend to see themselves as the helpers, and therefore they get their ego needs met from being needed. I’d like to be able to say that isn’t me, but I’m sure there have been times when that has been EXACTLY me. Leading the transformative work can be a difficult challenge. It’s hard to speak the truth when you know it will be painful for someone else to hear. It’s especially hard when you know that someone is going to be furious with you for calling her or him out on behaviors unfitting of the Christian life.

It helps me to have heard Dr. Brian Blount, New Testament scholar, and President of Union Presbyterian Seminary, talk about some of the same things from this very pulpit last weekend. He talked about keeping his edge, about wanting to be someone who challenged Christians to be more Christ-like in the upcoming Christmas season. To get our Christmas on, as he put it, would be to do the same kinds of things Jesus did in his ministry to overturn power, to show compassion to the outcast and oppressed, and to demonstrate the love of God to pick up and move the boundaries when they have become outdated limits that shut people out of relationships. He claimed the role of messenger in a pulpit where he could, perhaps, more easily drop his message and move on to address the next congregation. But he even worried about THAT. Would he say something here that I would have to “clean up” later? Messengers can leave a powerful wake behind them, and I appreciate very much that he was concerned about that prospect.

But I already know that it’s part of the gig of Christian ministry to invite people into the quest for transformation, a goal that just doesn’t happen without occasional conflict. As a minister

of the Word, you commit first and foremost to preaching and teaching the un-watered down gospel of Jesus Christ. There's a formidable message in there to proclaim, which means that message comes with some hard truths attached. The hard truth that comes from the messenger spoken about in Malachi and from the wilderness messenger John the Baptist is a radical call to repentance. Yes, of course, Jesus' message is all about love, but the messengers remind us that first we must examine ourselves to clear out the dead parts of ourselves, the things that are dragging others down, or unfairly persecuting our neighbors.

In both of these texts, the messenger claims to understand what God wants from human beings. God wants us to return. God wants us to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Return to me and I shall return to you. – God says.

And the people ask: *How shall we return?*

Bear fruits worthy of repentance. – God says.

And the people ask: *What then should we do?*

Messengers don't mince words. The bluntness of these texts should startle us. Quit robbing God. Quit speaking evil about God. Those who lie, and cheat their employees, and treat the alien harshly will be punished by God. John calls his audience, or at least part of his audience a "brood of vipers" and when he is asked by the people about what they should do, the advice is rather similar to what Malachi has to say. If you have two coats, give to the person who has none. If you have an abundance of food, do the same. Be honest in your business dealings. The good news that comes has to be good news for ALL, or it really isn't all that good. That's what the messengers, even today's deep Christian messengers, have to say with an edge in their voice. If you have a lot right

now, giving away your extra coats and food isn't too much to ask – except that we are taught that we deserve all that we have because we earned it. The world is quick to talk about scarcity and allow false measurements to tip the balance toward those who already have an abundance of power and resources. The love that Jesus talks about has to come from somewhere, and that means it has to come from us. We have to quit doing those things that separate us from God so we can make our return. And we have to bear the fruits of repentance which include radical hospitality and generosity.

But we can easily be angered by the messenger when he or she talks about what we have to do differently. I get it. I've been on that receiving end of anger multiple times. Sometimes I've been justified in stirring that anger – when I had to call out the uprising of Klan activity as a young pastor in Altoona, or when I had to speak to the rampant gossip stirring up trouble in my congregation in Tennessee. People got mad at me – but that was OK – perhaps that anger did the work it needed to do to bring about some changes. There were other times when I had no idea that something I said was going to raise the ire of others. Once I talked about a funny TV show I found to bring a helpful message in a sermon one time, and the couple who had watched it and thought it to be blasphemous were none too pleased with me. That likely wasn't the case of me being a prophetic messenger – but it reminded me that any time I'm in the pulpit – my words can be heard differently than when I'm just having a chat in the fellowship hall. The role of messenger carries weight, so using it wisely is important. I've even been corrected by a wise messenger from the congregation who points out something about my preaching that encourages me to become a better preacher by listening to the critique. In a loving congregation, worship is a two-way dialogue and benefits most from such open communication.

But here's my challenge for you, for people who seem to be OK with occasionally being discomfited by God's word. I may not need to point at you, to tell YOU to shape up your language or confront your inner bigotries – because truth be told – we're all working on those things and it matters that we keep opening even more boldly to the ways we show our hospitality and generosity. Getting our pre-Christmas game on is about doing just that, listening to the messengers of old telling us to get ready to have our lives changed by the love of God. What I want you as mature Christian followers to know, is that I'm not the only messenger here. You are Christians who know the gospel as well if not at times better than I do. You can use your own voice to speak the truth in love – to remind people gently or perhaps even more than gently to return to God and God's plan for their lives. You can tell your friends with multiple coats and more than enough food in their pantry that Christmas is a time of giving – not only to impress the grandkids – but to those whose lives will be made better by what they have to offer. Remember the message of these prophetic messengers, the good news breaking into our world is only good news when it is good news for ALL, not just good news for some.

Be the good news. Bring the radical message of lives transformed by a baby born into a dark world to bring the light to all people. Amen.