

MALACHI 3:1-4
LUKE 1:68-79
PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11
LUKE 3:1-6

Second Sunday of Advent
December 5, 2021; Year C

Refined and Purified: A Peace Tableau

One of the many interesting things about preaching is the way, or ways, that sermons are processed by the listener, how they are heard and perceived. An old, stale joke will illustrate what I mean:

There once was a small church in the country that was rather sparsely attended. Every Sunday, the young preacher would preach his heart out and receive the usual accolades at the end of the service. Every Sunday, without fail, one older gentleman, as he shook the preacher's hand would invariably say, "you really told 'em this week, preacher." On one occasion, a heavy snowstorm kept everyone at home, save for the old man and the preacher. The preacher decided they would hold the service anyway and so he preached to the old curmudgeon, other adjectives would surely apply. As the parishioner shook the preacher's hand on his way out the door, he said, "if they'd a been here, you'd really told 'em." Groan!

And that is why I never follow the obsolete, outdated, and outmoded practice of beginning a sermon with a canned joke! You have nowhere to go but up! I tell this tale certainly not in the least suggesting that there is any indication that this sort of phenomenon, this benign, passive way of listening to sermons is even a remote possibility here at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Eagle River. Never! In fact, I have been very impressed and pleased with the engagement, the receptivity, surrounding my preaching. You either really appreciate it immensely, or I am still the new guy, and you are just being tolerant and polite. I am going to assume the best and continue to live in my delusional fantasy. But seriously, I have been very impressed with the

attention that you give my homiletical musings. It really makes the labor-intensive exercise fulfilling, turning a sometimes tedious task into an enjoyable enterprise, a delightful process, indeed making the writing and editing of these weekly offerings most worthwhile. Regarding this joke to begin our sermon conversation today, it indeed tells its very own mini-sermon, indicative of human nature, for none of us wants to be “preached to” as we say. None of us wants, to misuse the words of Roberta Flack, to be killed softly with the preacher’s song in this soliloquy in sermon form. None of us wants our face strummed with the rhythm of verbal assaults, the congregant’s lives sung with words that are often far more invasive and influential than they should be because they are spoken from the pulpit, this holy piece of furniture possessing far more power than it really should. The table is now set for our engagement with today’s lections and the sermon’s journey they undergird.

Like prophets before him and many others to follow, the prophet Malachi came preaching judgment and justice, the two terms often hardwired, enmeshed to the point where the reader unfortunately cannot tell the subtle or stark differences between them, impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends. His prophecy was a call to repentance and faith to a community considered dull and lifeless, an apathetically lethargic people. Malachi’s refrain was not unlike most pronouncements called out by and cried out from the Israelite prophets, certainly echoed in the verbal histrionics of John the Baptist many years later, the Christian scriptures version of the ancient prophets and their prophecy of old. Not much is known about the person of Malachi other than the fact that his words carried enough weight, were significantly impactful enough, to become holy writ in the Hebrew Bible, that point alone making him worthy of note and our close consideration. His name means “My messenger,” an obvious reference to his standing in the prophetic line that was headlined by so many more familiar and noteworthy preachers from back in the

day, Isaiah and Jeremiah prime examples. He was but one of many who came and went, preaching and prophesying during Israel's history, these religious town criers always at the ready to give instruction to the former Hebrew slaves during these formative and evolutionary times. Living between the years 500-450 BCE, as we make the mythic countdown to the time of the birth of Jesus and the advent of a calendar still in use today, thank you Pope Gregory, Malachi was preaching, prophesying to a post-exilic people, the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem including its crowning achievement, its hallowed temple a not-too-distant memory. Ah Zion, home, the leveling of the great city and its opulent house of worship having taken place in 587 BCE, shaking the Israelites to the foundations of their souls, destroying whatever optimistic spirits buoyed them and carried them as a people. These were a people who were still shell-shocked, living in the aftermath of Babylonian captivity, displaced under the heavy hand of King Nebuchadnezzar, taken hostage and removed from a land of promise that they had once ironically violently seized, a settlement that had become their ancestral homeland. They had returned to a literal disaster, the proverbial dumpster fire, everything flattened, nothing of value remaining. They were now picking up the pieces as best they could, doing their best Humpty-Dumpty impersonation, their newly constructed temple a mere shell of the former glory as conceived and constructed under the reign of King Solomon, David's boy, a chip off the old block.

There is nothing worse than nostalgia, the emotional baggage that comes with looking through the rose-colored lenses of denial's revisionist history, a rearview mirror, that much like the funhouse variety, gives the most distorted image of days gone by, always making the past look like Camelot, proverbial days of wine and roses, salad days on steroids. Yes, making the nation great again! Objects in the rearview mirror may literally be closer than they seem, but they are also metaphorical mirages that dull our senses and delude our

perceived perspectives of historic reality. Yes, Jerusalem had been rebuilt, but it clearly lacked the splendor, the luster, the opulence, reflecting the power and privilege infused in the halcyon pre-exilic days of the city's inhabitants. Rather than continuing to see their once great city as the cosmic center of the universe by its inhabitants, a great enclave where peoples from all the nations would gather and pay homage, Jerusalem, formerly named Jebus in its original Canaanite version, had now been rendered to rubble, reduced to nothing more than another stop on the way to who knows where, unlucky, misfortunate travelers now forced to go by way of a backwoods, backwater, one horse town that was no longer a stop to be desired and enjoyed. Not so suddenly, there was now a malaise gripping the people, communal depression hovering over the once great city, the citizenry enveloped and overwhelmed by a corporate sense of hopelessness and abject despondency. The town was now reflective of the doom and gloom mood overwhelming the inhabitants who had been lucky enough to survive captivity but did not think that luck was an appropriate adjective to describe their plight as a wounded people. It was as if they had an emotional case of communal COVID! Dull and lifeless, it seemed they were now inflicted with an epidemic social disease, the ills, of a now pedestrian, boring routine of an ordinary existence. Surely, this was not the fate of the presumed chosen people, a people who believed that they had been specially selected by God as God's favorites, smugly arrogant in their communal narcissism, hubris on steroids. This surely was not going to continue to be their collective lot in life. Surely, this was but a temporary blip on the radar! Surely this malfeasance on behalf of the Holy One was a misunderstanding of divine magnitude, surely an egregious error, an obvious blunder had been made in judgment and action, a mistake of the highest magnitude. Someone upstairs must have missed the memo! Just what was God thinking, or was God thinking, to allow the shame of the chosen ones' displacement, and then to add insult to injury, poking at their open, gaping, civic wound,

the shock upon their return to what seemed to be a God-forsaken land. How humbling! How humiliating!

Yes, individually and collectively, this once proud, even conceitedly arrogant, narcissistically infused, hubris overloaded, citizenry had lost belief and faith to the point of utter indifference, skepticism immediately and immeasurably giving way to cynicism, doubt, doom and gloom, consuming their being to the point of a societal catatonia, a collective immobilization of body and spirit. This was a communal conglomeration, conflagration, of Job-like stuff. As they used to sing on Hee Haw, you do remember now don't you, you can admit it, "Gloom, despair and agony on me; deep dark depression, excessive misery; if it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all; gloom despair and agony on me." They placed blame of their history, their forebears who surely screwed up royally, never looking within, and of course, accusing their adversaries, their numerous enemies, of perpetrating this evil upon them. And yes, of course they lashed out at God, always an easy and convenient target when things do not go our way, the Holy One of whom and on whom they blamed the most for their misery. God is always an easy scapegoat to explain away all our ills, unless of course, the devil made me do it! Self-reflection, not so much! So as others in the business who came before him and would come after him, here comes the prophet Malachi to stir the waters, to set things straight, to settle the score, doing all the typical, stereotypical things that prophets do.

Now never mind the fact, according to the biblical narrative, that it was these fat and happy Israelites who had broken covenant with Yahweh, a covenant long established by their ancestors as they anticipated the Promised Land with all its flowing milk and honey. Malachi reminds them that this was a covenant of life and peace, peace being that operative word on this Second Sunday of Advent. Yes, they had attained the good life, achieved greatness, and all they had to do was

follow the rubrics, the laws set down by their forebears in the faith, stand up, sit down, don't rock the boat. Sounds like something right out of that Garden of Eden debacle. They had not learned a very important lesson about obedience! And they blew it! They royally blew it! It seems that the only energy this now wayward people could find was the strength to complain, the resolve to gripe about all that had gone wrong, to wax eloquent about all the negativity that now ensnared them and threatened their frail and fragile existence, existence being the operative word to describe their new circumstances and surroundings. Yes, they were a "whiny" people, but aren't we all when things go sour, when things do not go our way. The loss of faith, individually and/or collectively, has got to be at the top of the list of things that most diminish our humanity when we happen to be persons of faith. Yes, they had profaned the covenant. So, what's new? We all are prone to our proclivity to err, for erring is indeed a very human trait. That is the nature of human nature. And not only that, but they had perpetrated the number one sin, the ultimate abomination by embracing those who had embraced false gods. It was as if they had embraced those very deities themselves. For all intents and purposes, might as well have! To relate to these pagans with their false gods was seen as tantamount to accommodating, condoning, even embracing. "You shall have no other gods before me" because I am one jealous God! And despite their propensity to commit these offending practices, they seemed sincerely, honestly surprised, yes perplexed, when God refused to accept their offerings, no doubt considered insincere and second rate. Perhaps seeking forgiveness was in order? "Why me?" became their constant companion, a steady refrain, a short litany with a long history describing the bane of their daily outlook. Into the vortex of this whirlwind, into the midst of this sad and pathetic state of affairs, as they stood at the edge of their own self-prophesied abyss, Malachi the prophet came preaching a word of hope, but a word demanding their participation and their willingness to comply with divine instruction. They had ignored the manual and now were getting the

word straight from the proverbial horse's mouth in God's very mouthpiece.

Malachi seized this civic and sacred moment, grasping his role with aplomb, aggressively articulate, demonstrably bold, vigorously persuasive. Ignoring their complaint and their complaining, ignoring their plight, their dullness and lifelessness, ignoring their unforgivable ignorance, Malachi, with crystal clarity, booming and boldly proclaimed the word of the Lord as he understood it and believed that God would have him deliver it, courageous in every way. It was not what they wanted to hear. Let's be honest, it rarely if ever is! In fact, it might be safe to say that it never is because we always know better, we know what we need to hear and would rather hear. They wanted a prophet in the line of today's TV preachers, those savvy television evangelists right off Lifestyles of the Rich and Evangelical, all starring on the ubiquitous religious comedy channels, cable stations popping up overnight, multiplying seemingly by the day. They desired, thought they deserved, someone who would empathize and sympathize with their pitifully pathetic plight, without calling them to responsibility or demanding from them accountability, forcing them to own their actions and the role they played in manifesting their own fate. They wanted a patsy to pat them on the head and make them feel better, make them feel good, someone who would pander to their situation and take up their cause, arguing with the Holy for complete acquiescence, someone who would let them cry on the prophet's shoulder, lending an ear to their side of the story. No, they just needed a quick fix! C'mon folks, we all know that is not how it works with these ancient narratives from the Hebrew Bible. This unfaithful crowd in no way wanted or needed a prophet, a real preacher, no they desired a puppet, a prophetic purveyor of pathetically pitiful pandering of pietistic pablum. Well, there was not one of those available so a real prophet would have to do! Malachi to the rescue!

The prophet takes no prisoners with his accusatory salvos, addressing their complaining and whining, refusing to fall into the trap of buying their griping nonsense, of getting sucked down the circling drain, the flushing toilet, of their hype in their hysterical histrionics. Malachi addresses their faithlessness, their miserably dull existence, their sinful ways, specifically their profaning of the covenant. As we like to say, Malachi had gone from preaching to meddling. He declares, “You have wearied the Lord with your words,” no doubt a proclamation that nobody wanted to hear. And then he veers right into the vortex of his message with the acclamation, the pinnacle of his prophetic message, surprisingly professing, turning his narrative on a dime, doing a proverbial 180, wildly and ridiculously proclaiming that a new day was coming, a day that would cut through the thick morass of this people’s dull existence, penetrating their lifelessness, the boring routine of ordinary living that was suffocating, choking the life right out of them. As former president George W. once exclaimed, “The past is over!” There was only one caveat to these pious promises, this would constitute either good news or bad news based on which side of the fence these whiners and complainers chose to be, where they decided to sit or stand. Things would never be the same, for God was sending an unknown and unnamed messenger before the Lord and into the midst who would be armed with justice and righteousness. Malachi roars, “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 fuller’s soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord.” Oh my! “Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old as in former years.” Refiner’s fire, a heat so hot that it purifies metal; fuller’s soap, a nasty, stringent soap, much like lye I suppose, strong enough to clean the wool that comes off the nastiest sheep of the field. Making Fuller’s soap was a rancid process, so disgusting that it had to be made outside of town to avoid the horrible smell from taking over

and lingering. Yes, this mysterious messenger would bring judgment but that was to be perceived as good news, at least for those who longed for it and awaited a different dynamic, a different life narrative. For in the strange world of God's realm, judgment is always tempered with justice. They are two sides of an inseparable coin. The bond that holds them together is the very grace of God, a grace that allows those who are willing to look beyond the present to see a bright future, the new horizon of a new day dawning. Yes, in this good grace, always tempered with mercy, we find the delicious flavoring of hope, peace, joy, and love, yes, the very Advent themes that guide our worship.

In today's Witness from the Gospels in Luke we read one of numerous recollections of the ways and means of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. He literally embodied the Christian scriptures version of the old-time prophets described in epic detail in the Hebrew Bible from back in the day. John comes as one crying out in the wilderness, and that was so true because he did indeed live safely on the outskirts of town, for from the city's vast temptations, a wild man recalling the most outrageous personifications of his predecessors, eating strange food, and dressing like a borderline caveman, uncouth in every way imaginable. a wild man recalling the most outrageous This throwback echoes the promises of old, declaring to everyone that they should cease what they are doing, all their present activity, and listen to him, everyone called to prepare "the way of the Lord," to "make God's paths straight." Intentionality on steroids! John T. recalls the familiar refrain in the wonderful promise of Isaiah, "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Now while we are never privy to the messianic figure promised by the prophets of old, prophets like Malachi, our Christian tradition has allowed us the major assumption, correct or incorrect, that these words would be fulfilled in the person of Jesus. It is always a dangerous game to impose Christian tradition onto

that of our Jewish forebears, supersessionism, the interpretation of the Christian scriptures in light of the Hebrew Bible, always filled with interpretive dilemmas, problematical understandings. Even so, just like the writers of our first Christian scriptures, we also see these parallels and so we dare make these leaps, have the audacity to suggest, that at least for our purposes, we allow that stretch of an interpretive possibility. In our minds all that Malachi had promised, along with a cohort of prophets down through the years, was coming to pass in the preaching of John and the mission and ministry of Jesus. If Jesus was not “the” promised one of Israel, he certainly made for a nice substitute, a great facsimile thereof! For indeed, he came as one who shunned John’s winnowing fork and fiery chaff and embraced a yoke that was easy and a burden that was light. Jesus eschewed all the militaristic images, the warring symbols, John thought so necessary to get a thick people’s attention. Jesus came bringing peace devoid of the sword that unfortunately still gets hardwired onto his person by many angry, conservative Christians who seem to be full of vengeance and the need for retribution, who have a predisposed death wish, hellbent to condemn some of God’s human creation. **Yes, John was proclaiming, promising a new day, declaring in his preaching as he fulfilled his turn as prophet that a new day was and is dawning, just on the horizon, a wonderful day filled to capacity with righteousness and justice, a day unlike any other, yes, once proclaimed by the likes of Malachi and Isaiah and Zechariah and now envisioned by John the baptizer. Yes, there is judgment, but it is judgment tempered by and bathed in justice, the grace of God meted out in this one humble human being from Nazareth, a real person of incarnational quality, carrying and conveying a real message, yes, a word of hope, peace, joy, and love, necessary ingredients for living the kinds of lives God intended for all, everyone created *imago Dei*, in the very image of God.**

In some, if not many ways, we can all count the challenges of our time, yes, we could begin and end with the pandemic called COVID, ad

nauseum. OK, that will do! That is enough! Yes, our days indeed reflect, even mimic, the days of old, mirroring the ancients' days filled to the brim with stress and trial, fear and anxiety to the max, anger and frustration on steroids, myriad concerns and issues that keep coming our way and quite honestly have always plagued humanity, been a steady companion to our human journey. What is old is new and vice versa! Yes, the more things change the more they remain the same. Yes, history repeats, and repeats, and repeats! We can all recite in painstaking detail the litany of misery confronting us daily, things that seem anything but minutiae, but larger than life slings and arrows of the most outrageous fortune. Let's not today! I would, however, be derelict in duty, absentmindedly remiss if I did not acknowledge another school shooting, another rampaging massacre at the hands of one teenager randomly firing coldly and mercilessly on his fellow students. Yes, the predicaments and predilections we read, described in detail, by ancient writers revealing the context and cultural milieu of their contemporaries, those who are our forbearing faithful in the midst of their challenges, whose stories are joyfully and painfully recalled in the Hebrew Bible. They are not unlike our own, nothing unique to our predispositions and preferences. Their journey, like the journeys of all human beings, is our journey as well. And long after we have passed the proverbial torch, those who follow in our steps will say the same because there is nothing else to say, no other option available because all our steps are part of the whole, the larger human journey, the struggle inherent in being human, evolutionarily instill in our humanity. **We await with excitement and anticipation, with conviction devoid of condemnation, anticipating the coming of God's realm on earth as described and exemplified by Jesus, the one who is the embodiment of redemption and whatever this mythical thing is that we call salvation. In Jesus we are given the grace of the Gospels and the gospel that it conveys, pregnant with all the goodness that comes from a creative and creating God, conceived from the very foundations of the universe and the earth it holds dearly and**

tenderly. The words of Isaiah echoed by John only come to fruition when we choose to activate, when we choose to envision, imagine, and create them. We cannot wait for God to do what we are called to do, to bring peace on earth and good will to all, yes, to be peacemakers. What do you do when there is no peace? You become a peacemaker, a transformative presence. As Franciscan priest Richard Rohr notes, “pain that is not transformed is transferred!” In other words, it becomes behaviors expressed in a torrent of inappropriate ways, mass shootings the most notable and horrific example. We have the power; we have been emboldened, yes, empowered, to make the substantive changes needed to save our global village from ourselves, to make the pathway of peace a God-given right for all persons. As Valarie Kaur says in her epic book, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, we need to “reimagine the world.” She says, “we create the beloved community by being in beloved community.” Grace Lee Boggs, American author, social activist, philosopher, and feminist, asserts, “Institutions in our society need reinventing. Time has come for a new dream. That’s what being a revolutionary is.” Kaur reminds her reader that “the greatest social reformers in history did not only resist oppressors—they held up a vision of what the world ought to be. Nanak sang it. Muhammad led it. Jesus taught it. Buddha envisioned it. King dreamed it. Dorothy Day labored for it. Mandela lived it. Gandhi died for it.” (So did Jesus and King, I might add). “Grace Lee Boggs fought for it for seven decades.” The debates over who is in or out is rendered irrelevant, for this gospel is intended for all flesh, befitting of and committing to an accepting and affirming, expansive and extravagant welcoming and inclusive spirit, always open to the other and everyone. Human interpretations designed to limit God’s grace are barred from this conversation, a no-fly zone, never allowed in the least because they are antithetical to the gospel.

So, rejoice today for redemption, our redemption, yes, yours and mine, is always drawing near. Always not yet, but close enough to taste. Yes, that is the mystery of God's coming. . . and going! Fear not God's judgment because God's judgment is merely masquerading as justice and vice versa, and that is always a good thing. Yes, God is reconciling the world, purifying and refining, threshing with a winnowing fork of goodness and grace, mercy unlimited, hope, peace, joy, and love abounding and unbound, set free in the universe. Christ has come into the world to make us the best we can be, to make us more human, fully human, ever closer to an image of our creator God, mirroring the Holy in as much as we can in this life. Yes, that is the work of the refiner, the purifier, the winnower, a harbinger of peace on earth and good will to all, bringing a message of love sometimes unfortunately twisted, perverted as guilt, vengeance, and punishment, all that negative residual, horrific stuff, held and used to meet narrow retributive agendas by those whose faith is transactionally dependent on a judgmental deity. No, God's blanket goodness is intended by the Holy One as a source of grace and as an efficacious means of building community, beloved faith community. During this Advent, God would have us give up our dullness, our lifelessness, our faithlessness, abandon the ordinary routines that limit our creativity and our hopefulness, give up any of our guilt-inducing and faith suppressing theologies, all the while finding paths of freedom and the unlimited, unfettered resources that enhance our lives and make life worth the living. And if you need a sign of wonder crystalizing, galvanizing the very grace of God, look no further than the Table, this Table, for it is a Table laden with grace, a reminder of the greatest gift ever, not that Jesus died for my sins or in my place, but that he lived and died to illustrate the depth and breadth of what genuine, authentic, sacrificial love looks like. As Irene Monroe says in her article for *Progressing Spirit*, it is not that "Jesus died on the cross for our sins" but because of them. Well said! **Indeed, it is the gift that**

keeps on giving. And as we all know, so much of this holy season is all about the giving of good gifts.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and callus one and calls us all to be peacemakers, to make a difference in our little corner of the world and in all God's global village. Thanks be to God! Amen and amen!