

EXPECTING JUDGMENT

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

December 6, 2009

Scripture: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

I always love this time of year, expectations run so high. The stores are decorated, the Tartan Fair, the carols on the radio, the choir singing Magnificat or Messiah. It's a beautiful time in the city as well. The tree is lit in Rockefeller Center. The tourists are in town. Every seat in Broadway is full. There's a festive feeling all around.

It was Labor Day last week I thought, or was it Halloween? But now the days are hastening on.

Christmas has become a holiday with so much attached to it that it almost falls under the weight of too many expectations. I don't know if any Christmas can ever live up to all that we ask of it. It would be big enough if it were simply the religious celebration of the birth of Jesus, but we have also laid on it memories and expectations so great that no one Christmas can be enough.

Christmas is for kids we say, and so we make it an orgy of gift giving and candy and toys and magical stories with dancing Christmas trees and marching nutcrackers.

Christmas is romantic, it's for falling in love and getting engaged and holding hands at the movies, and ice skating together at Rockefeller Center, and kissing under the mistletoe.

It's parties and laughter and joy and fun and food and giving-and-getting gifts. It used to be about bonuses in the old days, two years ago. And sometimes it's adopting a needy family and giving a coat or a sweater or a pair of shoes to someone who has none.

All of this is what's around us, but in the church it's not yet Christmastide. It's Advent, a different season, where time is not measured in shopping days till Christmas, but as an interval with its own kind of mood and expectation. More somber than the world's preparations, more reflective than the eye popping windows in stores up the Avenue. The color of the season is a moody purple, and the hymns are in a minor chord, calling us away from the secular preparations of shopping and partying to a more sober assessment of what it is we long for, and seek from God.

Over the next three weeks as Advent unfolds, this season of watching and waiting and expectation, I want to think with you about what it is that we are expecting as Christians in these Advent days. What is it that we are hoping for, looking to see, longing to behold?

Within the Christian tradition, there are two primary expectations associated with Advent. One is the birth of the baby Jesus, that story at the end of these days that we love to hear. The story of the miraculous pregnancy of Mary and the long journey to Bethlehem, the cold rude manger offset by the warm glow of the lantern in a cow's stall;

the shepherds abiding in the fields awakened by angels; and the night travels of three kings guided by a star. One of the expectations of Advent is the birth of a savior.

The other expectation of Advent is the coming of the Son of Man in judgment and finality to rule the earth, to settle accounts. We profess it in the Apostle's Creed, *from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead*. It is an expectation we can barely articulate it is so awesome, a belief so startling that we are hardly comfortable with it.

But it's that second expectation that I want to think about with you today. The one that points us to God's justice as a hope for the world. Both the Lukan passage and especially the reading from the prophet Malachi ring with judgment as a theme for our advent expectations. Both bear a warning to prepare for the coming of One who will judge the earth.

In Luke's story, John the Baptist stands in the wilderness preaching a gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and warns that the wheat and the chaff will soon be separated and the chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire. The Malachi passage is even more stark in its clarity.

Malachi's words break into our festive Christmas mood like party crashers at the White House, all dressed up but not really welcome, and somewhat dangerous. The old prophet writes of a sudden return of the Lord to the temple where accounts will be settled and judgment rendered.

Who of us can endure the day of his coming, [he asks] and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like the fuller's soap... and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold...

Suddenly these familiar words from Handel's Messiah reiterating Malachi's prophecy leap off the page in a new way. We hear them not as an energetic chorus of trilling sopranos and altos, tenors and basses, but as the clarion call of warning to straighten up and fly right, because accounts are soon to be settled. The wheat will be separated from the chaff, the gold refined in the fire. And it's jarring to hear.

As Malachi writes these words, hard times have hit Israel in the 5th Century BC. They are back from exile. The temple is rebuilt. But there is corruption in high places and God's people are falling far short of the mark. Robert McAfee Brown has a wonderful summary of the context of Malachi's prophecy. He says,

The Jews have come back from the exile and resettled in Palestine, but things are not going well. In particular, maintaining the temple cult is expensive, and the Every Member Canvass is bogged down; only 62% of last year's pledges have been renewed. To make things worse, the sorcerers are raking in a big haul in the marketplaces, the rich are oppressing the poor once again, and widows and orphans are getting the short end of the stick as usual.¹

The parallels between Malachi's time and ours are close. We live in a time of economic decline. As in Malachi's era, the poor are getting poorer, the widow and single mother are losing ground, their children have less, and all of us are suffering from the after effects of greed on our economy. 7% of all mortgages nationally are in default. 10% of the population is unemployed. African American youth suffer twice that level of unemployment. And a generation of young people are dying in two simultaneous wars overseas.

Generosity suffers. Giving is down 10% in most churches I know. An organist friend of mine in Denver writes in his Christmas letter this year that in order to preserve jobs at his church, everyone's salary was cut by 12%.

Here in our city homeless shelters have suffered funding cuts, and senior programs are being curtailed in a year when the mayoral election was the most extravagantly funded in history. The poor are being oppressed again by the grinding realities of rent increases and food costs and unemployment.

And speaking of injustice, I was fascinated at the comment of one of the State Senators this week who voted against gay marriage in the New York State Senate. He said that the reason he could not support gay marriage was not because he had moral qualms about it, or that he didn't believe it was just, he said it was because people in this state are in a tough economic time, urgent legislation is needed, and their minds are just not on matters like domestic justice. The implication being that the fine points of addressing domestic law will have to wait for a more flush time in the state as if the one did not relate to the other.

Maybe it's only me, but this is the same senate that frittered away the summer and left the people of the state languishing for governance because it was deadlocked in the self-serving question of which party had a majority. Where was the urgency to deal with important issues before the state five months ago? My guess is that Malachi would wretch at hypocrisy like that.

For who of us can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like the fuller's soap... and he will purify the descendents of Levi and refine them like gold...

I don't know about you, but I am always nervous about the judgment passages in scripture. They make me squirm. I like to relegate them to the eye rolling fundamentalists who are always preaching hellfire and damnation. Our friend Ernie Campbell, Pastor Emeritus at the Riverside Church, tells about being afraid to go to the movies as a boy for fear that should the second coming occur while he was watching Roy Rogers or Hopalong Cassidy in an old Western on a Saturday afternoon, he would go straight to hell. You don't want to be doing anything that you wouldn't want Jesus to see when he returns, was the operative threat. And *there's* a moral compass for you!

I have been fascinated by the press' relentless charge on Tiger Woods' predicament this past week. And I suppose that someone as squeaky clean as Tiger has

always been a walking target for the press. No tree makes a greater sound in the forest than the mighty oak when it falls. But I also wonder if there is not some fascination in finding someone whom we all look up to and who can be sacrificed with relish on the altar of exposure, so that attention may be diverted from our own case.

For who of us can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

The liberal church is always articulate about grace. Good at describing the love of God that exceeds our transgression of it. If the truth were known we say the confession of sin in the liturgy with reluctance, assuming that it is for the sake of our neighbors in the pew more than for us, while we embrace wholeheartedly the words of assurance, "I declare to you in the name of Jesus Christ, that our sins are forgiven."

Every Inquirers' class I teach, I describe Calvin's concept of Total Depravity, which I humanize by saying it's the doctrine that acknowledges, "I've fallen and I can't get up." In other words, by definition, "I am a sinner, deserving of God's condemnation." And I feel the wincing in myself and see it in the new members when I teach that.

The truth is hard to take. But how else do you explain that we consistently and repeatedly choose to do those things which harm ourselves and others; that we save our cruelest words for those we love the most, that the secrets that we keep from one another define us more than the image that we project to others?

Every therapist in this town hears confession all week long and cannot pass judgment or offer absolution but only withhold judgment and seek clarity. They are not the same. If you cannot come to church and deal with the sin that hangs so closely, then where can you address it?

It is a terrible thing for that which you least want to confess about yourself to be revealed. But there is one thing worse, and that is that who you are is never revealed, that no one ever notices you at all, or considers that what you do is significant.

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury writes,

We live as human beings, in an enormous hunger to be spoken to, to be touched, to be judged, and loved and absolved. We live – at some level – in the awareness that there are things we cannot do for ourselves. No human being alone can teach herself language; no human being alone can know himself loved. And the whole human race alone cannot assure itself of its worth or interest, its dignity and lovableness, its responsibility. When no reality over against us pronounces a word of judgment or a word of affirmation, how do we know that we are worth judging?²

Like most of you, I have shied away from the passages of scripture that lay on the stripes about judgment. And while Christians sometimes mistakenly say that the judging God is the God of the Old Testament, and the God of the New Testament is all forgiveness; nothing could be further from the truth. To say such a thing is to ignore the

grace of the God in the Old Testament that creates the ordered universe, that offers a covenant repeatedly and renewably to his people, who leads out Israel from bondage, and who cares for the poor. It ignores as well the warnings on Jesus lips of the return of the Son of Man to judge the earth and to separate the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the chaff.

None of us likes the idea of judgment and fire, but fire there is in the Bible and we must make our peace with it.

Believe it or not, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, before he became Pope Benedict XVI, was a progressive theologian in the Roman church. He once wrote this, which comes to us as a word of assurance and encouragement, “There is a lot of talk in the New Testament about fire. The fire is Jesus Christ. The fire burns the stubble and impurities away from human life and refines it in justice and hope.”³

The refiner’s fire is the fire of the craftsperson who cares deeply about the raw ore, deeply enough to take it in hand, assess it critically, discerning the goodness that lies within, and applying the purifying fire that will bring that worth to shining clarity.⁴

The expectations of Advent begin with the expectation of judgment, because if there is no judgment, then life is a free flowing succession of meaningless events that are accountable to nothing. 9/11 would have no meaning, teenagers who this week were shot to death on the streets of this city would have no meaning, terrorists blowing up marketplaces in Baghdad would have no meaning, the deaths of these young soldiers whom we name each week would have no meaning. And the only thing worse than our lives being judged would be that our lives and the events of our time have no meaning.

Maturity in faith, it seems to me, is the understanding that life is meaningful before God, and that what I do is not without consequence. Therefore, whatever there is in me that participates in the reign of death, oppression, violence, or untruth, burn baby burn.⁵

We can say this without fear because we understand that the fire is not punitive, it is purifying. It is not vengeful, it is redemptive.

Tom Long in his Midwinter Lectures at Austin Seminary reminds us,

There is in Dacau, Germany a museum. It is a museum of the holocaust. The museum is on the grounds of the old concentration camp. In the museum of the holocaust there is a photograph that is so powerful that everyone who sees it, secular or religious, prays. It is the photograph of a mother and her little girl being marched to the gas chamber at Auschwitz. There’s not a thing the mother can do to stop this. And so she commits the only act of love she has left, she walks behind her daughter, puts her hand over her little girl’s eyes so she will not have to see where she is going. And everybody who sees that picture prays something like this: “O God do not let that be the last word. Do not let whatever that beast is in us and in history tell the full story of these people or any of us.”

I am promising you, said Jesus, that is not the last word. Standing at the end of time is the just judge who is the risen Christ.

And because he stands there, we need not fear the fire, for it is the fire that saves us, redeems us, and purifies us. For the fire is Jesus Christ. And he is our Advent Expectation.

For he is like a refiner's fire and like the fuller's soap... he will purify the descendents of Levi and refine them like gold...

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2009.

¹ Robert McAfee Brown, **Reclaiming the Bible**, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) 115.

² Rowan Williams, **A Ray of Darkness**. (Cambridge/Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995) 3-5.

³ As quoted by Thomas Long, in his Midwinters Lecture at Austin Theological Seminary, February, 2009

⁴ From notes on this passage from KC Ptomey, Jr. Moveable Feast, Advent 2, Year C, 2006 Feast.

⁵ Long, *Ibid.* Tom Long uses a similar phrasing in his lecture and closes the sentence with the “Burn, baby, burn” reference.