

During Advent 1928, Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached a sermon in Barcelona, Spain in which he spoke about the emotion for this season: "It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming so calmly," he said, "whereas previously peoples *trembled* at the day of God....We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel *the shiver of fear* that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us." Bonhoeffer wasn't making that up. Although his sermon didn't specifically mention Malachi, his words reflect the message that prophet brought.

Malachi was the last of the prophets. His ministry took place about 460 B.C., almost 100 years after the people of Judah had returned from exile in Babylon and more than 50 years after the temple had been rebuilt in Jerusalem. Some of the people had hoped, and even expected, that the completion of the Temple would launch a new era where Judah would return to her former power, glory, and independence. But that did not happen, and the people of Israel faced the fact that they would remain subjects of the Persian Empire, and that their land would be nothing more than an outlying province of that kingdom.

There was not a lot of incentive for vibrant worship of God. Malachi's book records God's reprimand to the priests who had become careless and sloppy in their duties in the temple, and to the people who had become lazy and indifferent in their attitude toward God. In 2:17, Malachi tells the people that they have "weari[ed]" the Lord with their words. "How?" they ask. The prophet says, "By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.'" Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?" Biblical commentator Peter C. Craigie says that the people Malachi addresses "have become, by their attitudes and actions, functional atheists, not bothering to deny the existence of God, but destroying any link between God and justice, or between the Almighty and good and evil."

**Fire and soap.** A prophet's job is to speak God's truth to God's people. Malachi, the messenger of God, tells the people of *another* messenger who will come, suddenly and without warning, who will be an advance man for God Almighty. And that messenger's job will be to make the way ready for the Lord. That messenger will function like a refiner's fire, which rids gold and silver of its impurities, and only *his fire will purify the people*. This new messenger will also be like fullers' soap, a caustic concoction containing alkali, potash and lye. It will get things clean, but it's very hard on the garments. But, of course, it's not garments this coming messenger intends to wash, but people.

The smelting and scrubbing this messenger will do is, in effect, God's judgment for all. And for some, that judgment will be the final verdict. Verse 5 speaks of some for whom the messenger's arrival will be only bad news: sorcerers, adulterers, those who swear falsely, those who cheat the hired workers of fair wages, those who oppress the widow and the orphan, those who cast aside the alien, and those who do not fear the Lord. They will perish, Malachi says.

Everybody will be judged, says the prophet, but some will be redeemed. Malachi doesn't speak about repentance, only God's initiative, but the implication is that those whom God will redeem are those who turn to the Lord. They will be saved, but it will be a rough redemption, a trial by fire, a caustic washing. For them, the fear is like that of a cancer patient who is facing a treatment regimen that will cure him, but the regimen itself is so ruthless that it fills him with fear. But in order to be healed, he must endure it.

**Feel the fear!** This word from Malachi applies to us, too; and whether we will be among those who perish or those who will be redeemed, there's good reason for terror. Advent is a good time to feel that fear. In the sermon mentioned previously, Bonhoeffer went on to say, "Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace."

But in which group - the perishing or the saved - will we be? Malachi's words are aimed in such a way as to puncture confidence: "Who can endure the day of his coming?" It might be a good thing to have our pride punctured if that confidence keeps us from serious commitment to God, or causes us to take our salvation for granted. Polls continue to show that most Americans who believe in heaven also believe they are going there. Yet the percentage who think they have a spot reserved in eternity is much larger than the percentage of people actively engaged in following Jesus. Advent calls us to examine our assumptions about our destiny and look at our priorities.

Malachi's good news is that God takes the initiative and does the necessary purifying, so that we need not live constantly in terror. It doesn't hurt, however, to be reminded that God's grace is not cheap, and that redemption is a strong cure, worth going through because of the outcome, but not something to be taken lightly or assumed as our prerogative.

Remember the famous painting that shows Jesus standing at a doorway in a garden, patiently knocking on the door? It's usually understood as picturing Christ's *asking* admission into our hearts. But for many of us, our surrender to Christ came not because he gently asked permission to come into our lives, but because he kicked in the door in and invaded our life, commandeering space and making it clear that he was taking over, at least for a while. Eventually we made a choice about whether or not to let him remain, but, initially, our defenses were overwhelmed. That kind of roughness squares with Malachi's words about redemption. While a few of us may have found discipleship an easy path to walk, others of us had to be catapulted onto it from self-centeredness, sin-blindness and self-righteousness.

It's clear in the New Testament that the gospel writers understood John the Baptist to be the messenger about whom Malachi spoke (see Mt. 11:10; Mk. 1:2; Lk. 1:76), and we note that John's call for repentance from sin was not a soft and tender moment either. But that was the first Advent. It's the second Advent that's ahead for us. Jesus is coming again, and Malachi's messenger may precede him. So, during this season, feel the fear! Let your pride be pierced. Reaffirm your commitment to Christ. Know the grace of walking with him as a faithful disciple.

**Prayer:** Great God, we need to remember that how things are now is not how they've always been; and it's not how they always will be. We need to remember that your kingdom has come, that it is growing among us now, and that the time will come when it fills the world with justice and love. And so we pray for your coming, to those around the world whose poverty, pain, trauma, and grief make your kingdom feel like a pipe dream; to those in our community who long to see your love and justice expressed through your followers; to those in your Church who seek to be faithful and to make a difference while juggling the needs of themselves and their families; and to us, who long to know you more, and to live as citizens of your kingdom in this place and time. May your coming be something we hope for, but also be something we experience moment by moment. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

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# The Terror of Advent

**First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2016**

**The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

**Malachi 2:17-3:5 and Luke 1:67-79**

What strikes terror in your heart? Is it spiders or snakes? Do clowns make you quake? Are you afraid of things that go bump in the night? Does the thought of making a public speech keep you up at night? What about cramped spaces, or sharks, or heights, or zombies, or thunderstorms? Does going to the dentist scare you? Everybody has something that frightens them to their very core.

But what about Advent? Advent should scare the breath out of us! It should scare us witless. It should turn our legs to pudding, get our knees a-shaking, and turn our blood to ice water. Although we usually associate Advent with good cheer, holiday carols, and the sounds of children laughing, we get a very different view from the curmudgeonly prophet Malachi, whose thunderings we read in the last book of the Old Testament. Our text from Malachi, one of the traditional readings for this time of year, suggests that the emotion that's most appropriate for Advent is *terror*!

Can you think of a time that Advent terrorized you? How about when Advent terrorized your children because you made them sit on Santa's lap at the mall, and they cried and screamed bloody murder. You may feel terrorized by the price tags. You may feel terrorized by anti-Christian sentiment that often surfaces in the media at this time of the year. You may feel terrorized by the sheer number of things to do before Christmas Eve arrives in just 18 days. It can all make you feel as if you're losing your mind. I can make your blood pressure go off the charts.

But this is not the terror Malachi is talking about. He's talking about heart-clutching fear, "I'm-going-to-die" horror, "This-can't-be-happening-to-me" terror.

Let's remind ourselves that, on the church calendar, Advent is not just a prelude to the celebration of Jesus' birth in a Bethlehem manger. Advent is also a time to think more broadly about God's coming ("advent" means "coming") not only in the past, when Jesus was born, but also in the future, when he comes again. And from our perspective, living long after his first coming, it is Christ's return that should concern us most.