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Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6
Preparing by Repenting

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; ³and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:2-3, RSV)

I dare say that he preached a “baptism of repentance” because there was need for some repenting back then. Still is need, in my opinion.

Over breakfast earlier this week, Carol read aloud a verse from her morning Bible reading. It is a verse from Psalm 50. Our Monday evening Bible Study happened to study that Psalm just recently, but this particular verse did not strike me then quite so forcefully as it did when Carol read it aloud at breakfast time. It is a verse that refers to people’s willingness to condone theft and adultery and to engage in lying and slander even against one’s brother. The verse goes this way:

²¹These things you have done and I have been silent; *you thought that I was one like yourself*. But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you. (Psalm 50:21, RSV)

“Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself,” as the *King James Version* puts it. Well, if ever we did this, what were we thinking? Through all the ages and all the centuries of the people of God, what were we thinking whenever we supposed that the Lord of heaven and earth is such a one as ourselves? Dare we fashion our Maker in our own image? Do we imagine that we can say “Thus saith the Lord,” when the Lord has not said thus? Would we imagine that we could get away with it if we, or a national church, or even ten thousand angels were to say, “The Lord forbids this kind of deed, yet we allow it”?

In the flow of our Bible, the very last book prior to the New Testament is the book of Malachi. This morning’s First Lesson comes from that book. Our reading picks up with the promise of a messenger. It is a lovely verse. We are glad to read it Advent by Advent. We understand it to refer to John the Baptist. It goes this way:

Behold, I send 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, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 3:1, RSV)

So, that is the beginning verse of our First Lesson. But if we expand the context of this reading by but a single verse earlier, we begin to understand *why it is* that the Lord has resolved to send his messenger. It turns out that the Lord has determined to send his messenger because the Lord has become weary:

¹⁷You have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, “Every one who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?” (Malachi 2:17, RSV)

This verse is rather the reverse of a moving testimony in the prophet Jeremiah. In that passage, Jeremiah says that he has tried to hold his tongue, but he has become weary and can no longer be silent:

⁹If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. (Jeremiah 20:9, RSV)

That is Jeremiah. But in the Malachi passage, it is not the prophet who is weary, but God himself! He is weary with our sinful ways. He has been silent long enough. He means to be silent no longer. In John the Baptist we have the Lord starting to speak, starting to contend with our human hearts, starting to appeal to us to repent and mend our ways.

Anyone who loves can become weary with waiting on the beloved. Parents can become weary waiting on their children. Husbands and wives can become weary waiting on their spouses. It does not mean that the weary one want to hurt the beloved. It just means that there comes a point where the weary one has to begin to speak.

When the Lord became weary, he spoke. First with John the Baptist, then most beautifully and truly with Jesus of Nazareth.

Our world has that capacity: to be so very out of sync with the ways of the Lord that He can take it no longer. Something has got to change.

These days, my son Sam and I are big time into the American writer of fiction Cormac McCarthy. He is a Pulitzer Prize winner, getting older now, but still writing. In fact, there was an article in this week’s *New York Times* about him donating his Olivetti manual typewriter to auction at Christie’s¹. He wrote probably twelve books on that old typewriter, plus screenplays, letters and so on. His book *No Country for Old Men* was made into a movie and won the Academy

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/01/books/01typewriter.html?_r=1&hp

Award best picture last year. Let me talk about this book a bit. It is a crime story set in west Texas.

In the movie, the role of Sheriff Bell is played by Tommy Lee Jones. The movie includes some of Sheriff Bell's monologues. They are reflections by an old lawman, sick at heart over the increase of crime in our land. Old Sheriff Bell, in my opinion, is speaking of the kinds of things that lead this old preacher to think that Jesus is coming again, soon. It becomes harder and harder to imagine that our Maker is going to remain silent much longer.

In one of Sheriff Bell's early monologues, he recalls the only man he sent to the gas chamber. Sheriff Bell used to visit this man in prison. The prisoner had killed a teenage girl. He told the Sheriff that it was no crime of passion, as the defense attorney had tried to argue. No, he planned the crime, he did it coldly, and if he got out of prison, he'd do it again. Sheriff Bell ponders this, in amazement even as they are taking the man to the gas chamber:

Said he knew he was goin to hell. Told it to me out of his own mouth. I dont know what to make of that. I surely don't... He was not hard to talk to. Called me Sheriff. But I didnt know what to say to him. What do you say to a man that by his own admission has no soul? Why would you say anything? I've thought about it a good deal. But he wasnt nothin compared to what was comin down the pike.²

Here Sheriff Bell is referring to Anton Chigurh, the relentless killer played by Javier Bardem in the movie. Chigurh is the new and awful thing coming down the pike.

As it turns out, Sheriff Bell is troubled by Chigurh, but not just by him. He is also troubled by the times, for they seem so awfully violent to him. He says that short of the second coming of Jesus, he reckons that nothin can turn this train around:

I read in the papers here a while back some teachers come across a survey that was sent out back in the thirties to a number of schools around the country. Had this questionnaire about what was the problems with teachin in the schools. And they come across these forms, they'd been filled out and sent in from around the country answerin these questions. And the biggest problems they could name was things like talkin in class and runnin in the hallways. Chewin gum. Copyin homework. Things of that nature. So they got one of them forms that was blank and printed up a bunch of em and sent em back out to the same schools. Forty years later. Well, here come the answers back. Rape, arson, murder. Drugs. Suicide. So I think about that. Because a lot

² Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (Vintage Books: New York, 2005), pages 3-4, retaining, naturally, McCarthy's grammar and spelling.

of the time ever when I say anything about how the world is goin to hell in a handbasket people will just sort of smile and tell me I'm gettin old. That it's one of the symptoms. But my feelin about that is that anybody that cant tell the difference between rapin and murderin people and chewin gum has got a whole lot bigger of a problem than what I've got. Forty years is not a long time neither. Maybe the next forty of it will bring some of em out from under the ether. If it aint too late.³

The title I've jotted down on this sermon is "Preparing by Repenting." I feel that this title fairly follows the logic of today's Bible readings. The first premise is that God is not such a one as we are, and therefore he is not bound to remain silent forever about our ways, especially if he counts those ways to be sinful. Second, the Lord tells his people in advance what he is fixing to do. Malachi is a messenger that the Lord is stirring. So is John the Baptist. And third, the intervening time - the time when the Lord seems to be silent - should not be a time when we put our Maker out of mind and settle down into ways of sin, but rather should be a time of repentance and amendment of life. We should prepare for the Lord's advent by repenting and doing better with ourselves.

The time of the Lord's patience should not be squandered. It is as St. Paul said in his Second Chapter of Romans:

⁴...do you despise the riches of [the Lord's] kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? ⁵But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. (Romans 2:4-5, NRSV)

So, that is the logic. Jesus is coming. His advent is near. It is high time that we repent.

Still, I feel that something is missing in this logic. What is missing is the Bible's blessed confusion of "salvation" and "repentance." For it seems to me that the Bible almost uses these words interchangeably. Or better, the Bible speaks of each word as so intimately linked with the other that there is no real understanding of the one without the other. So, as the Bible measures things, repentance has a happy side to it. Repentance is not something you do to somehow make yourself worthy of salvation, but almost the other way around: Salvation *is* coming, and we'd be as dumb as dirt to not try to get ready for it.

Let me try to develop this idea in two ways: first, by speaking of the difference between John the Baptist and Jesus, and then by speaking of my nephew Nathan and of his recent first kiss with his bride, Abby.

So, first, John the Baptist. Next Sunday, we will hear some of the actual preaching of John the Baptist. Forgive me, but I think his preaching is harsh!

³ Ibid, pages 195-196.

Because I know by experience that preaching can be hard, both spiritually and intellectually, I try to not be too critical of other preachers, but mercy, John's preaching is extraordinary in its ability to inspire fear, while obscuring hope. I bet you remember some of his lines:

⁷He said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"
⁸Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Luke 3:7-9, RSV)

The problem here is that John *preaches to* sinners, but it is not clear that he much *likes* sinners. He preaches repentance, but without the joy of repentance. He seems not to live among obvious sinners. Rather, he lives in the wilderness and the sinners travel to him, probably meaning to head home and leave him in peace, thank you.

Jesus also is a preacher of repentance. That is the first thing St. Matthew says about Jesus when introducing our Lord's public ministry:

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. (Matthew 4:17, KJV)

So, Jesus too is a preacher of repentance. But also, he is a preacher of repentance who is also a friend of sinners. It was the great scandal about him: he is a friend of sinners.

John preached about the coming kingdom of heaven and he preached in a frightening way. Jesus also preached about that kingdom, but actually brought the kingdom of heaven to sinners by standing with them. He called them to repentance, but he stood close enough to them that they could hear him, and many of them understood that his call to repentance flowed from his love for them.

Let me try this again, this time by speaking of my nephew Nathan. Carol and I went down to Maryland last weekend for that wedding. The poor folk in our Monday Evening Bible Study had to endure my going on and on about this wedding, it seemed so extraordinary to me.

The remarkable thing about this wedding is that the first kiss of Nathan and Abby was literally their first kiss. Twenty-seven years old: Nathan had lived in hope and prayer and preparation for his beloved. Meanwhile, Abby had lived the same way, in hope, prayer, and preparation. Then, one day, the Lord sent Abby to Nathan. He had sought permission from her father to court her. They had held hands during the courting, but their first kiss was right there in our midst. I stood with the man at the front of the church and we watched the entrance procession.

My heart when out to Nathan, the blacksmith, as he watched his bride walk toward him. She was glowing and so was he.

This is what I mean by Christian repentance: it is standing there on tiptoe, as it were, eager to see the advent of Jesus. It is standing there, trying as best you can to be ready, to look good, probably even regretting that you had not waited and prepared even better in former years.

I am not especially urging that we follow Nathan and Abby in their particular form of waiting and preparation. Waiting on even your first kiss is probably not for everyone. But the particular form of waiting is not what I find so moving. It is simply the idea that one day our Beloved in heaven is going to come in glory again. The trumpet is going to sound, the sky is going to split, and our Beloved is going to come marching down the aisle toward us, and it is right and salutary that we should use this time left to us to prepare as best we can to meet him.

This is the merry kind of repentance of which Advent speaks. Someone is coming who is entirely worthy of our getting ready for him. To him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.