

Text: Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 1: 68-79
Title: On The Doorstep of the Promise

Date: December 6, 2009

It's the second Sunday in Advent, guess what we are going to talk about? If you have never noticed, there tends to be a definite pattern to Advent sermons. On the first Sunday we tend to look back at OT texts, foretelling the Messiah; on the 2nd, we tend to look at John the Baptist; the 3rd, Mary, and the depending on how close Christmas is to the Sunday Christmas or another Mary. This year is no different- yet we do Malachi a disservice if we skip right over him.

Malachi gets no respect. He is the last book in the OT, for most of us, if we are looking for something in the OT, if we hit Malachi, we've gone too far. The next page is Matthew, or if your Bible has the Apocrypha, Tobit. It's the same in the Hebrew bible, there Malachi is placed square in the middle, but he is the last of the prophets. At 4 chapters and only 55 verses how much weight can he swing? That, and he's not sexy at all- he's not like the other prophets who challenge kings and high priests alike- with messages of warning and vengeance, by the time Malachi is writing Judea is a small backwater in the Persian Empire. Malachi is all about covenant and restoration – and it is no accident that we link him with John the Baptist.

He is writing after the people came back from Babylon and after the Temple was rebuilt under Ezra and Nehemiah. You would think that after the Babylonian Exile people would take keeping the covenant seriously. But already, within a generation of the return. People were falling into the old habits of taking God and their covenant relationship with Him for granted. Our passage rightly starts with the last verse of chapter 2: 17 *You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, "How have we wearied him?" 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?"* Our passage is the answer.

God is going to start over. No, nothing like Noah- complete destruction or anything like that. Just the opposite. God will first send his messenger, and then the Messiah- the one anointed to rule with God's authority will suddenly appear out of nowhere and take center stage in the Temple. People will know that they are unable to

stand before him on their own merits and the judgment is at hand. And yet- there is no condemnation. We are to be refined, re- righteous-ed, enabled to be people who are able to keep the covenant and offer acceptable offerings. Wow, you can see why the early Christian Church gave Malachi all the respect that he deserved.

Which what Luke is doing as he tells the story of John. You remember the story, how Zechariah was serving in the Temple when the angel Gabriel showed up. Now Gabriel was no ordinary run of the mill angel, Gabriel was one of the seven angels who were constantly before the throne of God and he often served as a messenger. A message from Gabriel was a message from God- just ask Mary. Anyway Gabriel tells Zechariah that he is going to have a son and that his name will be John (God has been Gracious); that he will be a prophet from day one, sent to turn the hearts of the people back toward God in preparation of the Messiah. When Zechariah raises some commonsense objections (we are old); Gabriel strikes him deaf and dumb. In due course a baby is born. We catch up to Zechariah at the circumcision.

It was the custom for the father to name the son and everyone assumed it would be Zechariah (God has remembered) and were calling the baby that prior to the circumcision. Somehow Zechariah was able to tell Elizabeth about Gabriel, so she insisted that his name should be John. When Zechariah confirmed this, suddenly he was able to speak. Like Malachi before him- people asked a question, “what will this child become?” Zechariah’s blessing is the answer- the path that God has chosen for the baby.

First off, this baby has a place to play in God’s plans. I suppose like any good priest, Zechariah goes back to the covenant and the promises made to both Abraham and to David. Echoing Malachi, Zechariah states that God will send one who, and I think the NRSV really falls down on this one. The NRSV translates ***keras sutaarias*** “horn of salvation” as mighty savior in verse 69 *He has raised up a horn of salvation mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David.* There is debate whether or not horn of salvation refers to an actual horn or the horns of the altar, so they just wimp out. What is important is that Luke is putting John’s ministry squarely in the context of Jesus ministry. John never claimed to be the promised messiah- he pointed to Jesus instead. And everyone agrees that Jesus is the ***keras sutaarias*** here.

God is going to redeem his people. This redemption is not just the political redemption, the getting rid of the Romans that most of the people at that circumcision would have settled for. No, God is going to make it possible for his people to worship and serve God without fear. We are going to be holy and righteous. In other words, the promise to recreate us from the inside out made by Malachi is about to come true.

True to Malachi's word, God is going to send his messenger to prepare the way. In one of those ironic word plays found in Hebrew names, Malachi means My Messenger. John will be the messenger that Malachi foretold, sent to prepare the way of the One Who Is To Come. And that, of course, is exactly who John turns out to be. Not only will we remind people that it is never a good idea to take covenant status with God for granted- in this way he functions as the last of the OT prophets; he is also the one who baptizes Jesus, thus inaugurating Jesus' public ministry.

John's final call is to enable those he reminds of the promise that was given Jeremiah in 31:34 *No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."* The outward mark of the redeemed is that they are able to live out of the knowledge that has been given to us. Because we have been forgiven, we can forgive. Because we have experienced God's grace, we are able to extend that grace to others. No wonder Zechariah ends with foretelling that this knowledge would *guide our feet into the way of peace.*

Bottom line, both Malachi and Zechariah remind us that we stand in covenant relationship with God. this covenant's terms are set by God, and our ability to live according to the covenant is enabled by God. Because of what Jesus did for us, we are righteous and we are holy and therefore enabled to live a God's people. This is what we celebrate when we gather around the Lord's Table. This is the New Covenant- the restating and restructuring of the Old Covenant. God's fulfilling the promise to everyone from Abraham to Malachi.

Let us pray