

Sermon for December 6, 2015 (Advent 2, Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Malachi 3:1-7a; Canticle 16; Luke 3:1-6

Title: Your Messengers the Prophets

“Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts” (Malachi 3:7).

My dear friends, here in this season of Advent, we have returned once more to the voice of the prophets who bring a powerful and challenging message.

But why? Why must we return year after year to the prophets? To hear their message over and over again? Why must we, every single December, listen to John baptizing and rebuking people out in the wilderness?

Why? Perhaps it is because we human beings never – ever – seem to learn.

For a bit of background, you should know that Malachi is one of the Twelve.

The Twelve are the final 12 short prophetic books that, in the times of Jesus, were written together on one scroll. Hence this scroll was given the name of “The Twelve”, and today’s text comes from the very end of that scroll.

Nothing at all is known about this prophet – not even his name! The ascription of “Malachi” comes the opening line which says: “The word of the LORD to Israel by my messenger.” In Hebrew, the way you say “my messenger” is **mal-akí**.

Since no other name is given in the text, that one stuck!

Now, in our reading today, the prophet speaks of a process of purification and cleansing.

“He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold or silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old” (Malachi 3:3-4).

It sounds beautiful and lovely, but I must tell you that, at this moment in time, I feel quite skeptical that such a cleansing and purification is even remotely possible.

Remember that the prophet speaks about the nation as a whole. Many individual people have their lives entirely transformed by the grace of God, and this is amazing to behold.

But an entire nation? Is that even possible? Consider this planet earth as it is today. Where is such a purified nation? Where is there a pure group of people?

Is there a place, as Malachi describes, where there is no reliance on magic formulas, no adultery or marital unfaithfulness, no false swearing or deception, no unjustly low wages paid to workers, no lack of care for orphans and widows, no fear of immigrants and foreigners?

Where is this place? Is this even possible? Forgive me, please, for my skepticism.

But, you see, when I look at each one of you, each individual soul, I see unlimited potential and possibility. Looking at you gathered here today, I am an optimist.

And when I reflect on all of the goodwill and kindness and generosity on display yesterday at our amazing Sparkles fair, it makes me feel quite optimistic.

BUT... when I stop to consider humanity as a whole, as one collective body, as one species living together on this earth, it is a rather depressing thought.

What I see is an endless cycle of pain and suffering and destruction. Looking at the human race, I feel like a hopeless pessimist.

Why is it that we human beings never seem to learn? Don't misunderstand me. We have learned so much technical information about science and we know how to manipulate lifeless things to make them do what we want.

But we never seem to learn anything about the heart, about our desires and passions and cravings, about our souls.

The sad reality is that each new generation must make the same mistakes that have been made by each generation since time immemorial.

They fall in love with the wrong people. They fail to apply themselves to learn as much as possible. They chase after things that don't really matter.

They waste their money on things with no lasting value.

And, perhaps most poignant, so many think that they can change the world through hatred and violence.

If they would only ask their elders, the wise ones who have lived and experienced all of these things, and who have learned what is truly important and what is not!

But when you are young, you don't want to hear these things from your elders. You need to experience them for yourself.

And so the endless cycle of pain and suffering continues along, generation after generation.

This reality was driven home to me once again over the Thanksgiving weekend. As some of you know, our son Angus brought another cadet back with him from West Point – Joe, from San Diego. On the day after Thanksgiving, we spent the day together in Boston and showed Joe around the city, since he had never before been in New England. It was a beautiful day. At one stop, Joe bought himself a pair of Nike sneakers at the huge Nike store on Newbury Street in the city.

Later, as we were driving back to Falmouth, we were all talking together about items which these young men might need to take back to school with them.

I was shocked to hear both Joe and Angus insist that they needed to have Nike brand socks to wear with their Nike brand shoes. And this was important to them!

At first, I thought they were joking. But they went on talking about how no one can wear Under Armor socks with Nike shoes, or vice versa.

Now, let's put this in perspective. These two young men are potentially 30 months away from deployment as officers in the US Army. In less than 3 years, it is possible that they will be engaged in our nation's fight against radical Islamic terrorists.

They have sworn the Oath of Allegiance to support and defend the Constitution of the United States. They have been trained to survive chemical warfare and to stage strategic attacks out of Blackhawk helicopters using night-vision goggles. They are preparing to sacrifice their own lives, if needed, to defend our nation.

And yet – STILL – they are mentally held captive by silly, petty little concerns, like ensuring that their socks and shoes are the same matching brand!

If Joe and Angus ever do enter into combat and survive to tell about it, you can be sure that they will NOT care any longer about the brand of their socks!

But it's impossible to tell them that now. Believe me – I tried, and I failed!

WHY is it so difficult for human beings to learn from our mistakes?

Oh, we might learn – as individuals, as we age and mature and become wise.

But then the next generation comes along, and they don't want to hear about it from us! They need to discover for themselves.

This, my friends, is the immense poverty of humanity: we do not learn from the wisdom of the past.

Perhaps this is why we must return to these sacred texts of the prophets and the apostles – over and over again.

Each one of us needs to hear – again and again – the prophets' call to repentance. And each new generation must be confronted with the prophets' demands for justice, holiness, and integrity.

As one in the line of the great prophets of old, John the Baptizer had the same goal as Malachi and the Twelve: to see a redeemed, purified, holy people of God living in their own land in freedom and peace – as God intended.

Baptism was his Spirit-inspired tool to prepare the way for God's kingdom.

My friends: we should understand that the Islamic State and their supporters share the same kind of prophetic goal: to see a holy people purified of all that violates their twisted and distorted understanding of God's will.

But they are fools. Nothing they do will ever change a thing. Their works are useless and unavailing.

Why is it so hard for humans to learn that the will of God can never be advanced by force or violence?

Here, in Advent, we are reminded to wait in patience for Christ who is to come and make all things new.

It is not OUR job to make a pure and holy nation. THAT job belongs to God, and to God alone.

Rather, "Return to me," says the Lord, "and I will return to you" (Malachi 3:7).

Let us return to God by waiting in patience and stillness, by trusting with quiet confidence, by acting in justice and compassion.

IF we can do this, if we can stay the course in this way, even though all of humanity around us continues its endless cycles of pain and suffering, you and I will do our part to prepare the way of the Lord. And that will be enough.
Amen.