

Discovering the Way of Purity

Second Sunday in Advent,

December 6, 2009,

Jill R. Russell

Texts: Malachi 3.1-4;
Luke 1.68-79;
Philippians 1.3-1;
Luke 3.1-6

So much about our world is broken and unfair. We don't even need to teach this harsh reality to our children. It is present in our experience so early and so often, it is a self-evident truth to a seven year old. Despite this sad and sorry state of affairs, human beings from every generation and from every culture of the world know deep in their souls that it should not be so.

N.T. Wright in his book *Simply Christian* claims: "It's as though we can hear, not perhaps a voice itself, but the echo of a voice... calling us, beckoning us, luring us to think that there might be such a thing as justice, as the world being put to rights, even though we find it so elusive."¹ This longing for God to come and for the world to be put to rights has been present since this prophecy of Malachi was penned five centuries before the birth of Christ. It was present in this song from Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, which was sung around the same time that Christ was coming into the world. It was present when Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians some 60 years after Christ. And I know it to be present in the hearts of this 21st century community of faith.

When you search the ancient scriptures for images of what the world-made-right is like, the most powerful word that you will find to describe it is the Hebrew word *Shalom* translated in English as *Peace*. I love the way Cornelius Plantinga describes shalom as the way things ought to be....all of nature and all human beings looking to God, walking with God, leaning toward God...the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in

¹ N.T. Wright , *Simply Christian* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), 3-4.

justice, fulfillment, and delight.² As Christians, we believe that we have seen the fullness of God's shalom (of God's peace) in the birth, life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Christ has already come, and with his Advent, we see even more clearly what the realm of God's peace is like. It is not for us the echo of a voice. It is the Word made flesh who has dwelt among us. But we are still waiting for the day when the peace of God's realm will be known not just in glimpses – moments here and there – but everywhere, at every moment, and in every realm of life. We still pray for the coming of God among us to put things right and to bring some justice to this corrupt and broken world.

The prophecy of Malachi issues a word of caution when we stand in that place of righteous indignation when we feel quite clear about where the world has gone wrong and who is in need of God's correction. Malachi was written in the years after the people of Israel returned from exile. They had high hopes for the restoration of their life in their homeland. They rebuilt the temple that had been destroyed, they reengaged their life there but their hopes for a return to their former glory as a strong and powerful nation went unfulfilled. Some blamed the corruption of their priests and wanted to clean house; others longed for retaliation against their enemies. Malachi understood that the corruption went beyond the practices of the priests in the temple. It went beyond the injustice of some perceived enemy. The whole community had lost its moral compass. They lost their sense of compassion for the poor. They set aside fidelity in their marriages. Their economic policies and social fabric was being torn apart by their own practices.

They longed for the Day of the Lord when things will be made right. Malachi's response is a version of "be careful what you ask for". Malachi warns them that the day of the Lord *is* coming "but who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap..."³ They were so busy pointing their fingers at the ones responsible for their decline that they failed to see how all of them had come to participate in the corruption of their life together.

² My paraphrase of Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 9-10.

³ Malachi 3.2

They needed to focus not just on their corrupt leaders or perceived enemies over there but on the places and the ways that corruption had distorted God's peace over here where they lived and moved and had their being.

I had a conversation this week with some colleagues about the painful dynamic when the people of God (especially those on the inside – the ones with power) begin to define who is acceptable in the community of faith and who needs God's correction before they can be included. One comment that has resonated in me since hearing it was how one colleague always shifts the conversation away from the question of what do they need to do to be made acceptable to the question of what does God require of me? That's the move that Malachi makes in this passage. It's the move that John the Baptist makes as well.

If we are longing for things to be made right – if what we desire is for God to dwell with us - then there is work to be done to prepare the way of the Lord. And it's not just work to be done out there in the world but work that needs to begin in here and with us. Paul ends up describing this work of preparation in a very similar way as the prophecy of Malachi: we are invited to discover the way of purity. The goal is for us to be pure and blameless. That's what Paul says. Malachi imagines that work of purification as the work of a refiner's fire that burns away all impurity. Paul paints a very different picture: the way of purity for Paul is discovered as we are immersed in the love of God. Now that's a different way to think about purity – isn't?

When I think about the idea of purity – when I think about people I've known who see their job as protecting purity whether that is purity of doctrine or purity of behavior - my mind imagines someone who is rigid and inflexible and completely devoid of all joy. I really appreciated Gordon's work with us last week in thinking in some new ways about justice and righteousness. I think Paul is doing a similar kind of work here: this passage from Philippians opens us up to a whole new way of envisioning God's work of purifying the human soul. As you come to know yourself as the beloved of God – as you come to receive God's love for you deep in your bones and let yourself be immersed in that love – that love begins to overflow. Because you begin to realize that it is not just

something you receive and hold on to. It is something that moves through us. Something we now offer to our neighbor, our colleagues, our children, our friends. Dare I say it as Jesus later says it: it becomes something we offer even to our enemies?

It leads to a whole new way of thinking. Paul's prayer is for love to overflow more and more with knowledge and insight to help you determine what is best.⁴ That's the critical piece. This is where the real transformation occurs: the way that the love of God becomes the gauge for what is best and for what we determine to be most important. This is where the rubber meets the road: in our choices, in our priorities, in our benchmarks. It's in the way we make decisions and allocate resources. The whole structure of our society gets set by our determination of what is best. It is in those decisions where the peace of God rises and falls in our shared experience.

This work of discovering the way of purity is the work of a lifetime. And because it is a work that is in progress and not yet complete there is a real longing and an ache inside of us for us and for the world to become a better place. The longing that gets expressed in this season of Advent resonates with where we live. So into the midst of that longing and aching, hear again the good news that Paul speaks to us from the book of Philippians today when he writes:

"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ...and this is my prayer that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced a harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."⁵

Amen.

⁴ Philippians 1.9-10a.

⁵ Philippians 1.6, 9-11.