

**Aldersgate United Methodist Church**

**December 7, 2025**

**“Let In the Light”**

**Pastor Sue McNicol**

**Scripture: Malachi 3:1-4 (NRSV)**

**The Coming Messenger**

3 See, I am sending 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— indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. <sup>2</sup> 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 washers’ soap; <sup>3</sup> he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. <sup>4</sup> Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in former years.

**Sermon – Let in the Light**

These first two Sundays of Advent focus on preparation, and as we all know, preparation often takes time. Today’s reading from the book of *Malachi*, an Old Testament book of the Prophets, gives no information about who its author may be. It’s a passage focused on the delivery of a message, which is convenient since Malachi –means “*my messenger*.” However, it’s also a bit baffling since biblical scholars are not certain exactly who the messenger is... some say since it speaks to “the messenger of the covenant” with the attribute “in whom you delight” it may refer to God or human beings alike. In writings centuries later in the New Testament, this Malachi verse merges with a verse in Second Isaiah (Isa. 40:3 “to prepare the way before me”) and may identify the messenger as John the Baptist. (Luke 7:27 “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.”) It’s one of those “who’s on

first, what's on second" sort of interpretive riddles. But one thing is for certain – the messenger, whoever it may be, has *passion*.

Passion sounds like something combustible, out of control and uncontainable. I like to think of spiritual passion as those experiences that bring us closer to God, awaken our hearts to new insights and ignite a "fire within" to take God's love into the world.

John the Baptist certainly had a fire within – he was one who said exactly what he was thinking, felt deeply, and showed up. His rough edges and rugged attire might not have been well received, but Luke doesn't seem as concerned about that as the other gospel writers. Luke looks beyond the surface to hear the voice of God coming from a somewhat surprising individual...the misfit known as John the Baptizer.

In true Malachi fashion (a book that poses twenty-two questions in just fifty-five verses) – I'd like to pose a few questions for us... "Who has passion? Who's on fire? Who is ready for the coming of Jesus?" John didn't hear the Word of God come to him in church or from some ruler or authority figure...he didn't feel that initial "spiritual passion" out among other people. The Word of God came to John in the wilderness. And then he took The Word to others through his actions, his encouragement, his pleading and begging, and his passion. But first came the wilderness experience.

Advent is a season of invitation into the wilderness, into a place of introspection and deep listening. It's a place where the distractions of the secular world are removed and spiritual awakenings may be just a whisper away. But for some of us the wilderness may also feel dangerous. As someone who has struggled with clinical depression all my life, the timing of the season of Advent really stinks – it sits smack dab in the middle of the darkest and dreariest days of the year – long, cold nights – isolating stretches created by others busy, busy schedules or bad weather – it's just not my idea wilderness season. I'd must prefer my "wilderness experiences" to take place on a sunny beach or warm, bright mountaintop.

So, let's talk about how Advent may lead us into the Christmas season and where we find ourselves on this four-week pilgrimage. Preparation is the cornerstone of this season of our liturgical year, as the prophets of old so clearly understood. In the words of Isaiah we hear,

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways make smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Prepare...prepare...prepare...but to that I want to add and EXPLORE! Explore, with passion, how God enters in and is revealed anew for you personally.

Who is to say this season of Advent – this time of waiting – is one size fits all. Does advent require stillness and seclusion. Maybe that’s exactly what some folks seek. I seek opportunities for newness, awakening and joy. I try to unplug a bit from all the typical demands and celebrate more deeply how God show up unexpectedly. I’m loving a new book this season titled *The Art of Living in Advent: 28 Days of Joyful Waiting* by Sylvie Vanhoozer. She draws on her upbringing in Provence, France, her theological pilgrimage in Paris, Cambridge, Edinburgh, and Chicago, and her passion as a botanic artist (as illustrator of foliage) to weave newness into advent. It’s a guide to the familiar biblical story of old with nudges to bring ourselves into the story. For me, it ignites my passion of experiencing God through creative expression. Instead of unpacking the nativity creche from its old worn box and placing the figures in their customary positions upon the same shelf in the same room of the house – what would it be like to bring ourselves and our neighbors into the nativity scene? Sylvie talks about this – and how the custom she grew up with involved making and placing little Provencal villagers (*Les Santons* – meaning “little Saints”) into the Christmas story as they pay homage to the Christ child – bakers, storytellers, farmers, and more. And in her culture, they gather fresh native plants and foliage for the creche from their own villages – so Christ knows them intimately and comes to them directly. It’s a beautiful and fresh reminder the story is not just one told in Bethlehem, but one that take place anew in our village as well – *only if* we allow ourselves to ignite passion and enter *into* the story- here and now. How might our creche take form if we were to embrace some of these ideas? What gifts would the Magi bring when visiting Jesus in our “village?” In Dillon Jesus might receive sheep’s wool, and in Butte He may see some copper thrown to the mix. Our “Bethlehem” may be fragrant with ponderosa pine or juniper, and pinecones of every shape and size. Allow yourself to re-imagine the story and explore its application for today.

Our scripture reading also speaks of a refiner's fire – that REALLY HOT fire – which burns away impurities. There's a lesson in this reference. Malachi talks a lot about silver and gold, but more so about silver. And yet, gold is more valuable, the best, top-of-the-line. However, silver is mentioned twice. Perhaps that's because silver is more labor-intensive in the refining process. In refining silver, the smith must stay attentive to how long it's in the fire, risking the heat by watching closely. But in the end, the silversmith will tell you the metal is ready to be worked into shape and used for its purpose, when he can see his face reflected.

Therein lies our message for today. How do we lean into our faith with passion and preparation – in such a way as to see God with us? Where do we seek insight and what brings us fresh perspective? What ignites our faith and our desire to grow? The answers are as diverse and exquisite as each and every one of us. As we wait and wonder and prepare – we may notice newness in our rich and meaningful traditions. We may hear the words of our favorite hymn from a fresh perspective or notice opportunities for us to bring more light into this often-dark season.

My dad used to say, "SueBob (ya, that was his goofy nickname for me), SueBob, you know what I love about living in Butte?" And I'd reply, "Tell me dad." (Even though I knew the answer from the many times he repeated this exchange with me.) "SueBob, the sun shines every single day in Butte. Sometimes it's only for a minute or two, but it shines e-v-e-r-y s-i-n-g-l-e d-a-y." His message has always spoken to me on a deeper level than just a weather report of sorts. God's light shines through, every single day, if we are mindful and attentive enough to take notice, to be aware of Christ with us. May your journey this advent season be one of passion, newness, wonder and light. Invite God into your heart to sit for a spell, and see what unfolds. Amen.