

# Making Room for Light

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman  
Malachi 3:1-4  
Second Weekend in Advent  
December 1-2, 2018

A few years ago, I decided to go a different direction with my Christmas tree at home. For years we bought a “wild” tree from the same lot. Wild trees haven’t been pruned or shaped; they just grow! I liked them. I would get my clippers out and give the tree my own shaping, kind of like a haircut. The naturalness appealed to me.

I was the main tree decorator ... and like most people, especially people my age, I have too many ornaments. Including those made by the boys when they were younger. Even though I liked my wild tree and my bazillion ornaments, I grew tired of my own tradition and talked Ed into an artificial, pre-lit tree. I leave more than half of the ornaments in the bins, in basement storage. Yes, even the sweet handmade ornaments are left carefully wrapped in tissue rather than adorning the perfect fake tree. My younger sentimental son noticed all of this, and said, “Hey! What about my childhood?!” So I have one childhood ornament from each son on the tree. I took a picture of them and sent it to them.

The perfect tree is beautiful and, I will say, a lot easier. But, truthfully, I miss the wild tree, its realness, bare spots, and imperfection. I have no idea what to do with all of the decorations.

What stays valuable? Important? Meaningful in our lives? What traditions do we keep and what do we let go of?

People have been asking these questions for a really long time.

This Advent Season we are focusing our First Lesson each week on the Hebrew Scripture, and this weekend we move to Malachi.

The setting is after the Exile. The people have returned to Judah, and the temple has been rebuilt. It is about five-hundred years before Jesus. This homecoming and building project should have been a time for joy and thanksgiving. But it didn’t work that way. Instead, there was discontent and disappointment.

The question of Malachi is what is the character of God’s justice? Still, we want to know. The priests were skeptical and doubtful. They had their own vision of justice in mind. They were disgusted that their enemies did not get the punishment they deserved! In other words, the bad people have not been punished, and the good people had not been rewarded. They expected divine retributive justice and did not get it.

Their frustration and discontent led them to arrogant certainty, unfaithfulness in relationships, offensive offerings, and weak worship.

Malachi was the bearer of hard news. “The LORD is sick and tired of your behavior and your words. You are as clueless as ungrateful children.”

They responded, “What?! What do you mean? Why shouldn’t we be put out? All of those who have done evil are good in the sight of the LORD. Where is the justice?” They whined. [1]

The shocker is that Malachi brought a word of judgment not to the enemies but to the people of Judah. They were stuck in their vision of God’s justice and their place in it. The purpose of judgment was not to punish but to prepare the way of the LORD, to invite the people to see the vision, to walk the path, to be restored and renewed as people of the Promise.

We know we have a lot for which to be thankful. The economy has improved; medical advances keep us going longer, with new knees and hips stents and medications. I know I am thankful for my new intraocular lenses. Our children have access to education and resources that will prepare them for the future. There are reasons for us to have confidence in our lives and in our times.

But like the old priest and people in Jerusalem twenty-five-hundred years ago, we are afraid and unsure. We are discontented and disappointed. Where is the justice in our world? Really. Who is winning? What are the answers? Every day we hear of more violence and mayhem. Socio-political problems, mental illness, and extremists threaten our safety, our society, our confidence, and our sense of hope.

Like ancient people, we start to think that some retributive justice, some good old-fashioned punishment is in order. It seems the evil ones escape and the good ones are gunned down. Couldn’t God solve this?

Malachi had a surprising and unwelcome message for the newly resettled, resentful people: “Start with yourselves. Yep, look inside. Clean up your own act.” Their lack of trust, their discontent, had morphed into narrow-minded certainty, arrogance, and wishy-washy relationships.

It may seem like a downer to come to church during the season of Advent and confess our sins. This is supposed to be a season of merry-making and joy as we prepare for Baby Jesus ... the One the angels claim to be the LORD.

The purpose of our confession is not to punish but to provide a path to walk with the Prince of Peace.

Confession is intentional and honest reflection, looking inside our hearts, minds, lives and memories, looking inside our own country, community, and church to see again and admit our tarnish, sins, and flaws.

My Williamsburg sterling silver set was tarnished from lack of use. I read that silver that's used doesn't need much polishing. So, at Easter, when I used my silver, I decided to keep it out, to use it every day. What was I saving it for?

It could be the prophet had this in mind ... like shiny silver, we reflect the image of God: Imago Dei.

Reflection and confession lead to forgiveness and renewal—we shine again!

“Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to God the Father,” we say to the newly baptized. [2]

But, sometimes, our shiny luster for life is tarnished by our hardship, losses, changes, and fears.

At my house, when I look up at the ceiling in the certain light, the presence and size of cobwebs surprise me. When I move big pieces of furniture, I find dust I had not even thought about. I cleaned my office cupboards out months ago. They are full and messy again! So, I close the door!

Malachi announce that the LORD OF HOSTS is sending a messenger. In time and in Christian tradition, this came to be understood as John the Baptist, who called for repentance, turning around.

So the messenger meets us ... and invites us ... to look into the corner of our lives, turn on the light, and look for the cobwebs of our criticisms and conclusions, and consider, what could happen if we swept them away?

Move the heavy furniture of grief and guilt, regrets of the past and resentment that has taken up residence. Sweep up the fur of fear and the dust of disappointment. Be brave. And let it go!

Over and over, we ask for God's restoring justice to happen. What would look different? In the congregation? In our lives? And in the world?

Here we have looked critically into our corners. We have literally gotten rid of heavy useless furniture. We have cleaned up cupboards, and space. We renovated the lower level and made into a fun, bright, uncluttered welcoming space. First, we had to see the problem, how bad it really was! Then we needed to clean stuff out, get rid of what we didn't need, all the while working with a vision of what is needed to accomplish our purpose.

And a couple of weeks ago, the Welcome Center got a makeover. The “wild tree” got a serious trimming! We moved around the old furniture; it is the same old pieces, just repositioned. The colorful, coordinated sections make it easier to determine what is going on and how we can participate.

And now the Sanctuary Hall is being tidied up. There is a table with all kinds of dishes left here. After worship, you are invited to see if any of them are yours!

Fourteen years ago, when we first started discussing building a new sanctuary, we decided then, “NO screens!” But times change. Should we stick to our old convictions, or consider that more people may be able to participate and receive the WORD this way? (What if, in Luther’s day, the people had said, “We will *not* use the printing press?”)

And what about our own lives? Surely, we know traditions change, and need to, when they don’t accomplish their purpose. Advent invites us to get in line with the people of Malachi’s time. To be willing to look at the clutter in our lives, not our closets so much, but our hearts and minds.

Advent and the prophets urge us to imagine the roughness of a relationship, damaged, made smooth with compassion. What would that look like?

Imagine, the crookedness of confusion and misunderstanding made straight with honesty. What would that look like?

Imagine, this season, instead of decorating more, what about making space?

Advent invites us to consider the content of our own hearts, to pull out the hurts and anger, grudges and envy, and take a close look.

Do we really need this?

We are like wild trees, imperfect, uneven, too fluffy in spots and empty in others.

So, we come this Advent season like wild trees, willing to be pruned with reflection and confession. To become branches of forgiveness and renewal, ready to bear light for the world to see!

Amen.

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#### Resources

[1] *Feasting on the Word*, page 26 and following, Advent 2

[2] Matthew 5:16

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## REFLECTION

- *Imagine the roughness in your life made smooth. The crookedness made straight. Imagine more space ... more grace!*
- *What hurts or angers are you holding on to? What are some ways you can begin to release them?*
- *Where can God's restorative justice polish you to reflect the divine image, so you can shine with Shalom for a world in need?*