

Waiting Well

3rd Weekend of Advent – December 16/17, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Malachi 3:14 (NRSV)

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. ²But 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 fullers' soap; ³he 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. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

John 1:6-8, 19-28 (NRSV)

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,

'Make straight the way of the Lord,' "

as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Christmas is about the keeping of a promise, God's promise made long ago. It can be very hard to hang on to God's promises when it seems that they will go forever unkept, but the Good News announced by John the Baptist assures us of God's faithfulness.

For most of us, Christmas is one of the most joyful and happy times of the years. But for some, Christmas can be especially difficult. My wife's sister lost her husband to cancer last March. This Christmas will be the first that Joan has spent without her husband of 37 years. Months ago, Joan made plans to do something different with her sons, something that would help her get through the holidays. We understand that. Each year at this time, St. Andrew has a special service of healing and remembrance for those who have suffered a loss in the past year, such as the death of a loved one or a divorce. This year's service will be this Tuesday evening, December 19, at 7pm in the Sanctuary.

I'm sure that some of those who have experienced such loss this year wonder where God has been, wanting God to account for his actions, to explain the suffering they endure. Remembering what God has done for them in the past, the love he has showered on them, doesn't necessarily help with the present, often making today's agony only the more bitter by comparison.

In her illuminating commentary on Malachi,¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier helps us to see that just as we cry out to God an indicting "Where are you?" in our suffering, so too did Israel in the days of Malachi.

Calling God to account

The Bible is filled with the long history of the Israelites calling God to account for his actions. Here are just a few: "How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?" (Psalm 74:10); "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," (Psalm 22:1, Mark 15:34); Moses – "Why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me?" (Exodus 5:22). Malachi continues this long tradition.

¹*Nahum – Malachi* in the *Interpretation* commentary series. Atlanta: John Knox Press. 1986. We aren't given any personal information about this prophet. It is possible that we don't even know his name, as "malachi" means simply "my messenger."

Written about 460BC, this brief scroll puts God on trial with the opening verse. As Achtemeier writes, Judah yet remains a struggling and impoverished little province within the Persian empire. None of Haggai's and Zechariah's promises of a glorious messianic kingdom have come to pass, despite the fact that the temple—in glorious as it is—has been rebuilt for over fifty years. The promised blessings from heaven have not been poured out: Locusts and drought still ravage Judah's crops; existence is still a desperate struggle. And so when God on trial defends himself, "I have loved you, and I love you still" (which is the sense of the verb in Mal. 1:2), Israel replies with a cynical sneer, "How hast thou loved us?" One can almost hear her angry retort: "Oh, do not recite the past for us! We know all about those marvelous things you did for our people in the past. All we want to know is, What have you done for us lately that could possibly show us that you in any manner love us in the present?"

Because God seems absent to the Israelites, they have given up any hope that God would keep his promises. They have even gone so far as to call "good" what is "evil" and claim that God delights in it! (see 2:17). For all intents and purposes, they have lost faith that there exists a special relationship between themselves and God. Thus, when we come to today's passage, there is irony in the phrases "the Lord whom you seek" and "the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight." The people have given up on God. They neither seek him nor do they delight in his messenger.

A Journey Through the Gospel of John

I'm sure that if you polled Christians and asked them to name their favorite book of the Bible, more would name John's gospel than would name any other. The gospel of John is moving and faith-creating. Perhaps this stems from John's explicit purpose in writing: "So that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

Beginning in January and continuing until Easter, we will devote considerable time and attention to the Gospel of John.

1. During the winter session of the St. Andrew Academy, I will teach an eight-week course on John. The class is being offered twice: Monday morning and Tuesday evening. We will look at ten of the most meaningful passages from John as we seek to embrace the transformation this Gospel offers us. Classes will begin the week of January 7. For more information and to register on-line, go to www.standrewacademy.org.

2. The Lenten sermon series, beginning the weekend of February 24/25, will be devoted to the Gospel of John, as will, of course, these studies. These seven sermons will be a great opportunity to extend our discussion of the true nature of transformation that we'll have begun in January with the series, *Searching for the Life You've Always Wanted*.

3. In January, we'll begin Reading with Heart, our year-long program in the art of spiritual Scripture reading. During Lent, our readings will take us through the Gospel of John at a pace geared for thoughtful and prayerful meditation.

4. My Sunday morning class, *Something More*, will also be devoted to John's Gospel during Lent. This is a large lecture-oriented class open to all adults. We meet in Wesley Hall at 9:30. We provide a learning experience that is a good supplement to the sermons and the background studies – as well as great fellowship!

Waiting well

With all the Christmas hoopla hitting us 24/7 in December, it can be pretty hard to remember that Advent is actually a somewhat dark season. Stroll through the advent hymns sometime and you'll see what I mean. My favorite advent hymn is "Come, O Come Emmanuel," a haunting tune and lyrics with an edge, no matter how it is arranged. You could also read through the Advent lectionary selections the church has used for centuries. There is that same edge to many of them. After all, who is really ready for the refiner's fire promised in today's lectionary passage?

Advent reflects the truth that the "facts on the ground" of our lives can often be difficult, so hard that our faith weakens. In Malachi's time, the facts on the ground were difficult and as the people waited, they lost faith. It seemed that God's promises would never be kept and perhaps never even existed in the first place. You might recall that nearly five centuries lay between Malachi and Jesus and in none of them did things get much better. Is it any wonder that by the time John the Baptist came bearing his announcement, all of Judea was wound so tightly it would soon explode?

Advent is this time of waiting, testing our faith that God will yet keep all his promises. As we celebrate our Lord's birth, we await his return, as we were reminded when we read 2 Peter last week.

But in our waiting we have an advantage over the Jews of Malachi's time. We have the fact of Christmas and the knowledge that in Christ, God was not only the great covenant-maker but the great covenant-keeper. We experience Advent in the light of Christmas. And we experience Christmas in the light of Good Friday and Easter. The Jews of Malachi's day did not wait well. Will we?

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

December 17-23

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Revelation 1-2; Isaiah 56 What do you think is conveyed about Jesus from the symbols of 1:12-20? The seven churches were all actual communities in western Asia Minor</p>	<p>Monday Revelation 3-4; Isaiah 57 Which of the seven churches would you like to be part of? Which not? You might pay special attention to the Laodiceans. The scene of God's throne is focused on worship of the almighty.</p>
<p>Tuesday Revelation 5-6; Isaiah 58 Notice that John is told to expect a lion but sees a lamb. This is Jesus. Read again Isaiah 53. Jesus is worshiped as the almighty is worshiped. The riders demand to know if we put our trust in anyone or anything other than God.</p>	<p>Wednesday Revelation 7-8; Isaiah 59 A multitude from every nation belongs to God. You will see scenes of increasing devastation followed by much of humanity's unwillingness to repent and come to God.</p>
<p>Thursday A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p>Friday Revelation 9-10; Isaiah 60 The terrifying images are not predictions of coming events. They are meant to force the reader to confront the consequences of living without God – choosing the world over God.</p>
<p>Saturday Revelation 11-12; Isaiah 61 Chapter 11 of Revelation closes the first act and we see that some did come to repentance. Chapter 12 opens the second half of the book as it retells, in a new way, the story of defiance of God. Isaiah 61 was read by Jesus in synagogue at the start of his public ministry (see Luke 4).</p>	

Sermon Notes

Make 2007 a year of transformation!

The Winter Session of the St. Andrew Academy begins the week of Jan. 7. On-line registration is available now at www.standrewacademy.org. Watch your mail for more information.

We've got a great line-up of classes for the winter St. Andrew Academy session. Classes include *The Gospel of John*; *Christianity and World Religions*; a new *Beth Moore Study* on the book of Daniel; *Six Strategies to Great Parenting*; *Discovering God's Will for Your Life*; *Finding Purpose Through Your Spiritual Gifts*; *The Miracles of Jesus*; *The Power of the Prophets*; *Spiritual Man-laws: Discussing Fella-ship in Church*; *Christian Meditation and Movement*; *Experiencing Philippians*; *Transformation: Sounds like a lot of work to me!*, and *A Faith to Live By*.

As you can see, this is one of the most exciting set of classes we've ever offered. New teachers include Rev. Edlen Cowley, Rev. Michael Reeves, Rev. Tom Gabbard, and Dr. Susan Gwaltney. Make plans now to join us. As always, free childcare is available and there are no fees for the classes.

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

Scott's Class, *Something More*, is open to all adults and offers a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Given all the Christmas preparations and parties this time of year, it can be pretty hard to see Advent as a season separate from Christmas, as a time of waiting and repentance. I've always found it hard to embrace the darkness of Advent. Do you? Why? You might recall the lighting of the Advent candles that is done by various St. Andrew families during the worship services. We light one candle at a time, enacting the emergence of light into world's darkness. How could we possibly go about incorporating this sense of waiting for the light into our Christmas preparations? How could we teach it to our children?
2. Some of us have no problem seeing darkness in Advent this year. St. Andrew's service of healing and remembrance is part of a long tradition in the Church. How could we be more helpful to those who are struggling with grief and loss this Christmas? How could we help bring light into their darkness? The service in the Sanctuary incorporates Holy Communion. Why do you think this is so? What might Communion reveal us to about darkness of Advent and the light of Christmas?