



# First United Church of Oak Park

You're So Vain,

You Probably Think This Scripture is About You

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

The Rev. Lydia Mulkey

December 9, 2018

In this reading, the prophet Malachi is speaking to a beleaguered bunch. They feel like even if they do what God asks of them, the evil get all the goods. The prophet is promising them that in the end, it matters that they did what was right, and that those who did evil won't always have it so easy.

Malachi 3:1-4 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

**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 fullers' 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.

Luke 3 tells us about John the Baptist. It begins with a who's who of powerful people. It starts with the political powers of the Roman Empire, moves to local politics, and then to the religious leadership of the time. All of this sets up a message from John the Baptist about how to prepare for Jesus' coming.

Luke 3 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

**3** In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup> as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

<sup>5</sup> 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 made smooth;

<sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

In the second year of the rule of the President Trump, when Bruce Rauner was governor over Illinois and Rahm Emanuel was ruler over Chicago, during the religious leadership of Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell Jr., and James Dobson, God's word came... not to any of them, but to strong but ignored leaders on Chicago's west and south sides, to children traumatized by gun violence, to trans\* people crying out that they will not be erased, to refugees, to the poor, to all those crying out in the wilderness.

I would love to give the writer of Luke a big pat on the back. That intro is a solid burn, and yet it is so subtle. The blogger who writes "Left Behind and Loving It" shares my love for this passage. He said, "The construction of this sentence raises the question of whether Luke is using the luminaries to fix an approximate date in history, or to contrast where a word of God is found, with where imperial and religious authority is found."

Either way, we do get some picture of the historical date, somewhere during the life of Jesus. If they thought living under Rome's thumb was difficult in Jesus' time, things were really heating up at the writing of these words.

We like to imagine that the gospels were written as eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life, but they were not. The gospel of Luke was likely written around the year 85. By this time, Rome had already destroyed Jerusalem, 15 year prior. Also by this time, Jesus' followers have figured out that he isn't coming right back like they thought and that they are going to have to figure out how to function within the Roman Empire. Because of this, the writer of Luke was always trying to minimize trouble with the authorities. This is likely one of the reasons he would include them in his writings. If all they saw or heard was the first part of the sentence that listed them as powers, they might think this story was about them, but it wasn't.

It's about the word, and to whom the word came. Actually, if you look at the Greek, "came" doesn't quite capture it. It's more like A Word was "coming into existence through," or maybe a word of God "originated in." And originated in or came into existence through whom?

The word of God wasn't coming into being through the powerful. The word was through John, an unknown prophet wearing camel hair and eating locusts in the desert, calling for repentance and saying that the lowly will be lifted up and the lofty brought down.

This week, I was reading about this prophecy from John and read this in the New Interpreters Bible: "In all ages, God's work proceeds among the poor and the dispossessed. A middle-class church in a nominally Christian society that enjoys religious liberty will have a hard time grasping the fact that Luke does not use these terms in a merely metaphorical or spiritual sense." -NIB p. 81

I resemble that remark!

This is not a call for the Israelites to cure only some spiritual ailment, or to fight some metaphorical battle. This is a call for a reordering of the actual imperial powers of this particular time and place.

It is so easy for us as to get caught up in the feel- good spirituality of this season; and don't get me wrong, that is wonderful and good for reviving our souls. I would be the chair of the mushy, warm and fuzzy Christmas committee. But that's certainly not why that baby was born in a Bethlehem. I assure you, John the Baptist would not be too pleased if our preparation for Jesus only included soft candlelight and warm fuzzies. He might be tempted to quote himself from later in Luke 3 and call us a "brood of vipers." John the Baptist wants to remind us that there is real work to be done; the valleys of oppression must literally be exalted, and the

mountains of abusive power must literally be brought low. We must prepare ourselves; and that can sound daunting. We may feel like the Israelites at the time of the prophet Malachi who complained and said, "Why do we even bother? We do what God asks and the wicked prosper anyway." I can relate to their frustration.

But Malachi and John the Baptist were trying to point the people of their time to some good news, and there's good news for us too. We know that Christmas is not about a God up there watching creation carry on, hoping we'll do our best, knowing we'll probably fail. Christmas is about a God who cares so much for us that this God goes so far as to put on a flesh-suit and say, I'm going to get in there with you and we are going to figure this thing out together. And again, who does God choose to work together with?

This week, I was listening to a podcast called Pulpit Fiction, and they said the beginning of this chapter of Luke is like the establishing shot of a movie where you're first figuring out where and who the movie is about... ok here's Rome and Emperor Tiberius, is it him? No. Ok, Pilate, is it him? No. Herod? No. Philip? No. Lysinius? Still no. Ok, must be Annas and Caiaphus; religious leaders would make sense. No? Oh, here it comes! Close up on.... Some dude in a camel suit eating bugs? What in the world is God doing?

What God is doing in the world is what God always does: working in the most unlikely places and in the most unlikely people. God is always at work through the lowly and oppressed, working with them for their wholeness and peace. God is always calling for us to listen to their voices crying out in the wilderness.

Advent is the time of year when we are on our way to, and searching for, the Christmas story. Who will be the main characters of this story for us this year? Where will Emmanuel, God with Us be residing? How will a word from God come into existence in 2018?

I can tell you this, there will be powerful people who think this story is about them. They will hear their name and think that Christmas is a gentle little story about how God wants them to be happy and have peace in their hearts.

But the story isn't really about them. If we can follow the story long enough, if we can wait through the establishing shots of the movie, we will find that the word will likely come through the most unlikely people. A word of God is always coming into being. This year, it probably won't come into being through political leaders, famous pastors, or any of the powerful people we can think of, but through the voices crying out in the wilderness. Through children, through women, through trans\* people, through people of color, through those who are at the margins, but crying out.

Through them, we will hear about something more important than our religious culture's warm and fuzzy version of the holiday. We will hear about a real story that is always unfolding. A real word from God coming into being, today. May we tune our hearts to hear not only the story of the word that came to those who lived in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, but God's word coming into existence right here and right now.