

## "Are There Any Messages?!"

Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

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### Malachi 3:1-4

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. {2} 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; {3} 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. {4} Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

### Philippians 1:3-11

I thank my God every time I remember you, {4} constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, {5} because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. {6} I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. {7} It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. {8} For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. {9} And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight {10} to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, {11} having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

### Luke 3:1-6

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 Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, {2} during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. {3} He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, {4} 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. {5} 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; {6} and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

John Malecki was a third year seminary student who lived in a lower middle class section of a fairly large southern city. His faith journey had led him down many different roads and his life had not always been smooth. He was a good student who had to work hard to achieve academically. He was a person who had a tremendous personal depth and was compassionate and caring and able to communicate these traits -- which had been communicated to him as a young person.

His father was a journeyman Presbyterian preacher. A man who had never served a church larger than a couple of hundred people. Almost always in the edge of the inner city. Almost always serving the working class churches that in the south were mainly known as 'mission' churches. These churches were usually in towns or cities with a First Presbyterian Church of some size, another downtown church, a few suburban churches and then on the outskirts of the city limits the mission church.

These were good people. Salt of the earth. People who understood that faith and life mixed together could help you to survive all sorts of ups and downs in living. People who lived in a kind of existence that was controlled as much by the verities of the textile industry as any other factor. They worked hard, they raised families, they worshiped and shared faith together.

It was in this environment that young John Malecki grew up. He went to the local schools, attended a state university -- that wasn't the state university -- even

though he would have preferred a private college education -- which they could not afford. He, with help, was accepted in the seminary his Dad had attended and he had worked hard to stay there -- to learn and to grow and to become what God had called him to be.

John was not a flashy person -- but it was obvious that he loved life and the church. He felt there was great need in the church for good preaching and teaching and caring for people. He also felt that the church needed to learn to be more responsive and responsible to people -- especially people that society was managing to push closer and closer to the fringes of existence. He wanted in his ministry to work towards calling the church to accountability -- to move from where it comfortably was -- to a new place.

In order for John to be able to afford seminary his local presbytery was giving his support as a 'candidate under their care'. Part of what the candidates committee did, beyond financial support, was to arrange for preaching opportunities for candidates when they were home for vacation time. This afforded them another chance to preach in different places and also help to put a little money in their pockets.

At about the end of November John got a phone call from the moderator of the candidates committee who asked John if he would be willing to share in a service on the second Sunday in Advent at the first presbyterian church in his home town. Since it was the week after exams he wouldn't have to preach, but the

church wanted to invite him because he was one of the young people they were helping in the seminary. The moderator explained to him that the church's associate pastor would be away and the senior minister, Clark Smith, who was a noted preacher, would love to have him share the pulpit for leading prayers and such. John readily agreed. He knew that church had been good to him.

The next week John got a letter from the pastor of the church generally welcoming him and outlining what he would like John to do. They would be following the lectionary and the service would center on the theme of repentance as preparation for the 'way of the Lord' the message came from Malachi and Isaiah by way of John the Baptist. The preacher asked John to read the Malachi passage and the passage from John. John thought this would be a good experience to see how the 'other half' lived and also to get to hear this preacher who was supposed to be very dynamic and powerful deal with what was a very powerful scripture. The letter also said that the minister would call John's home with instructions about when to come by on Saturday to go over the service.

Everything went well with exams and other than being exhausted John was ready to go home and enjoy the holidays. On Friday he left at noon to make the 8 hour drive home.

As he traveled along the highway he came to that notorious section of SC interstate when I-85 and I-26 and I-77 merge between around Columbia. It was Friday with typical Friday traffic and of course there was road construction going on.

There seemed to always be road construction going on here. He said to himself that if this was 'the way of the Lord' John spoke of that was being prepared in the wilderness of heart of SC that the Lord may never get to come again -- there were too many traffic barrels in the way.

John soon found himself caught in a real traffic snarl and he decided to pull off in the rest area near Orangeburg and take a break. While he was there he decided to call home and tell his Mom that he would be later than he thought. She said for him to be careful and he asked her if there were any messages for him.

She said, 'wait a minute, your Father has to talk to you. I don't know about what he won't say anything to me.'

John's Dad got on the phone and they exchanged traffic regrets and then John's Dad asked him a strange question. "John, do you have your bible with you?" John said, "Well, yes, it's packed with my books, why?" His father chuckled and said, 'well, before you get back on the road I want you to get out your Bible and read Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 3:1-6.'

John said, "Oh, yeah, those are the passages they want me to read on Sunday at First Pres." His Dad chuckled a little louder and said, "Uh, John, those are not only the passages you are going to read in worship -- those are the passages you are going to preach on!" There was silence on the end of the line. John's Dad said, "John are you there?"

John said, "Nice try Dad -- you almost had me!" John's Dad said, a little

more seriously, "John I'm not kidding, Clark Smith had a mild heart attack earlier today, the associate is in Illinois and the Clerk of the Session called and asked me if you could preach -- and of course I said. 'yes he will do a great job'." John said, "But Dad, I can't.." But before he could finish his sentence his Dad said, "John it is what you were called to do -- don't worry you have tonight and tomorrow and you know what we always talked about about preaching -- God has the message -- we just give the delivery."

"But Dad," John said, 'this is first pres., I don't even have suit to wear! All I've got is the green sports coat.' "It's Perfect," said his Dad with a laugh, "Green preacher, green coat." "You are no help Dad," said John. His Dad said, "It doesn't matter what you wear -- these are just people -- they need to hear God's word -- and what great stuff to work with. Malachi -- John the Baptist -- just tell it like it is John. Read the passages -- think about it on the way home -- we'll talk more tomorrow."

John hung up the phone -- his head swimming -- he was thinking about being unprepared and unworthy and, and as he walked down the sidewalk back to the car he bumped into a man and he snapped back to his senses. 'Excuse me' he managed to say, and the man growled, 'hey, watch where you're going!' and John said, 'Sorry.'

The man, poorly dressed with an air of homelessness about him, continued down the sidewalk and got in the cab of a pick-up truck that was loaded with what

looked to be the man's entire household. The truck was next to John's car and as he got close enough he noticed that in the truck was a woman and two small children. One of the children was asleep and the other, a perfectly cherubic little blonde with a bright blue eyes and peanut butter and jelly on her face smiled broadly at John.

John went to the trunk of his car and rambled through his stuff until he found his Bible. He got in and opened it and read first from Malachi -- "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. 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;. . ."

Racing through John's mind was all sorts of doubt -- what in the world kind of messenger could he be -- what in the world did he have to say to those people -- what kind of refiners fire could he be, still wet behind the ears, these people were used to great preaching -- what did they need to hear from him?

Of course he knew if he had the courage he knew what they needed to hear because it was what everybody needs to hear. God wants us to change. God wants us to look at where we are and go from there to where we should be. God wants us to hear the message of Advent and to have the message wake us up and like watchmen shouting on a city wall call us to change -- to clean us like a

refiners fire, like fullers soap -- he'd have to look those up in his Dad's dictionary of the Bible.

What else? Maybe the answer was in the Luke passage -- "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. {3} He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, {4} 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. {5} 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; {6} and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

John was sure of one thing, whatever else was true he felt a lot like crying here in the wilderness -- how could he preach preparation when he was so unprepared -- how could he preach repentance -- when he needed to repent so badly. And maybe that was where to start -- what did John the baptist, the fanatic of the Jordan have to say to him -- to John Malecki, son of a presbyterian preacher -- what was it he had thought out there on the road -- that with all this construction going on, with all the stuff in the way, God would never be able to get where God needed to be. He thought about his own life -- so much stuff -- studies, plans, worries, and now this preaching thing -- how could God get to him? Repent came to mind. They had recently talked about that word in New Testament studies. The literal meaning was 'to turn around -- to go away from where you are to a better, or

at least a different place. John thought, What we need to do is 'repent' to change our lives so that God can get to us -- so that we can go toward God again. Surely the people at 1st Pres. need to hear that? Doesn't everybody need to hear 'repent' every once in a while? His problem was how to say it with any authority -- how to say it and have people respond -- how to say it and still sound like a humble seminary student. But if you put Malachi and John together, you have a perfect Advent sermon -- here is a messenger -- the messenger says it's time to clean up your act -- to turn around from where you are and go towards God --

A sharp knock on the window of the car startled John -- it was the man he had bumped into moments before. John thought, 'this is all I need -- some crazy guy wanting to pick a fight because I bumped into him.' For a second he considered cranking the car and peeling out of there, but instead he felt compelled to roll the window down a little and ask the man what he needed.

So he did, "Can I help you?" John said. "Got any jumpers cables?!" the man asked. Somewhat relieved John said, "Sure, let me get out and I'll get them."

John and the man proceeded to get the cables and hook them to the old battery in the man's aged truck. As they did so John discovered that the man was from West Virginia but had been working in construction in Jacksonvill, and was headed home because work had dried up. He would try again after Christmas. John wished he could tell him that there were jobs around home but he knew things were tight there too.

With some difficulty and some luck they got the old truck cranked. The man shook John's hand with his own greasy paw and said, "thanks for the hep". I guess we'll be goin' now."

John returned the cables to his trunk and came back to get in his car. Sitting in the driver's seat, holding his Bible upside down, was the little blonde haired girl. Her Mom said, "Mary, come on the man has to go." John said, 'that's o.k. I've got plenty of time.'

The little girl looked at John and smiled and said, "mister, is this Jesus' book." Not really knowing what to say, certainly unaware of what kind of faith' if any' these people claimed, John answered, "yes, how did you know?"

The little girl pointed to the gold embossed cross on the binding of John's Bible and said, "Cause, this is Jesus' cross. So it must be his book, too."

From over his shoulder the little girl's Mother said, "C'mon Mary, give the man his Bible and let's go." The little girl looked at John and then at his Bible and said, "Mister, where's baby Jesus?" John looked at his bible and thought how do I explain to this little girl, when again from over his shoulder her Mom says, "Her grannies Bible has pictures and her favrite is baby Jesus and Mary and Joseph." John said, "I'm sorry honey, this Bible doesn't have pictures, but it does have the story -- here it is -- In those days a decree went up from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed and each went to his own city...."

As he finished reading the story the little girl looked at John and said, 'do you

know how to get the Bethlem?, Momma, let's go to Bethlem'. Her Mother said, O.K. Mary we'll go to bethlem now come on, leave the nice man alone." John looked at the word of the living God in the hands of this trusting little girl and said, "yeah, I think I know the way."

John said, "Would you like to have this Bible? I'd like to give it to you if its o.k. with your mom and dad." From behind her mom said, "It's o.k. with us. but we've got to go."

The little girl clutched the Bible in her arm, hugged John with the other and said, "I love you." With that she got in the truck, the man thanked John again and they went off into the twilight.

As John settled back in the seat of his car, cranked it and headed back towards the interstate and home he found at the center of his being a calm and contentment -- God had come to him, God had taken the initiative and had come to him --

John thought, maybe what I'll say somehow -- what I'll try to preach is -- how badly God wants to come to us -- and all we have to do to help is repent, go the other way, the right way towards God, to start over like this family and head off towards Bethlehem -- and we can prepare the way --

When he reached the highway he found that the snarling traffic was calmed and flowing freely -- on the PBS radio station the strains of the Messiah could be heard -- the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness -- prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.