

December 6, 2009: WHAT'S THAT TO ME?

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

Eileen Parfrey -- Springwater Presbyter

There are years when I think St Francis did us no favors by inaugurating the custom of the Christmas crèche. When our children act out the Christmas story after worship on December 20, they imitate the saint from Assisi who celebrated Christmas by inviting his neighbors to *experience* the gift of God's Son as they re-enacted the stable birth, the witness of the animals, the visits by the shepherds. Francis' gesture was a radical departure from the practice of the time, an evocation of the One crucified and risen as a vulnerable, squalling infant, which is the way of all babies. In truth, it's impossible to fully wrap one's head around the grace of the Creator with messy diapers and colic, but I'm beginning to lean toward Richard Rohr who says, "We do the Gospel no favor when we make Jesus, the Eternal Christ, into a perpetual baby, a baby able to ask little or no adult response from us." Rohr questions whether we are capable of spiritual maturity when we only know Jesus as a baby. God, he says, wants "adult religion and a mature, free response from us. God loves us as adult partners, with mutual give and take." Rohr's point is that "you eventually become the God that you love."¹

This is particularly discomfiting during Advent, when all the texts so far seem to reflect a judging, angry God. Look at Malachi, which Neal read as we lighted the Advent candles. Is this the God we're supposed to love? And if so, is this what we become like? Both Malachi (and John the Baptist in next week's text) use fire as the judging image, and we know fire to be both friend and foe. The 1902 Hillockburn fire destroyed our first church building along with houses, barns, and crops in Springwater. It's hard to imagine that kind of fire as "friend," but foresters know that certain tree seeds need fire's devastation to germinate. Malachi's refining fire doesn't sound friendly, but pastors are sometimes called upon to stand with people in their personal fires. We may, however, sometimes find that our job is to turn up the heat. That's what John the Baptist does for the people of Israel to help them prepare for the Messiah. As Luke locates John in time and place, he depicts a nobody in opposition of the civic and religious power of his time, pointing to the judgment that will set the entire world back on track. *This* is how to fill the potholes and straighten the bends in the road—repentance, change.

So what is it, exactly, that needs changing? Since before John, the lie has always been that we can do it alone, that we can accomplish God's kingdom and earn God's love. If we can only complete the self inventories and achieve repentance, the kingdom will come. John's message is, "The good ones go to hell. If you think you are pretty good on your own, you don't need God's help." It's only the ones who can say, "I can't" who get to the place where they say, "God can." Did you know that every time the gospel-writer Luke uses the word for sin, words associated with "forgive" are also present? "When repentance and forgiveness are available, judgment is good news."²

A lot of times, when bad things happen to people, they'll ask, "Why me?" That's a reasonable question. Why did this happen to *me*, what have I done to deserve this? I'd like to say that this is a good start. It has been my experience, though, that when people then ask, "What for?" their suffering begins to have some kind of meaning, and suffering is a lot easier when it's not meaningless. The confirmands and I are at the point in our exploration of the nature of God that we are asking, "Where is God in suffering—when babies die and innocent people are hurt in war and I am injured unjustly?" This is a reasonable and faithful question, "Where is God in suffering?" It's a question so honorable, in fact, that it has a title—theodicy. Theodicy is a bona fide theology, a respected way of searching for God. Whole books written about it. Back in the day when I asked my pastor my own "What for?" his consoling answer was, "So you'll be a better deacon." Or friend.

That's a good question. That's a good answer. What for? In order to help others, so that it will never happen again, to encourage me to act, to cause me to change. But I think there is another

¹ Adapted from [Preparing For Christmas](#), pp. 8-9 by Richard Rohr, from www.cacradicalgrace.org.

² Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, p. 49.

question, almost as a natural progression in this maturing process of faith. That question is, “Now what?” Indeed. Do you act, take risks? Do you decide to love instead, to love because of, to love despite this suffering? This terrible thing has happened, you have been challenged, God has disappeared—now what? What is asked of *you*? What is asked of God? How do you wait for the answer?

Are you tracking with me? Do you still remember what I said about judgment, that, “When repentance and forgiveness are available, judgment is good news”? Because I think there is still another question. One of my lectionary buddies proposed a deeper question about judgment, a more profound question in the face of wondering where God is in suffering. He suggests the question is, “Huh?” He says this is the un-Biblish-y pronunciation of YHWH, the Name of God. Sometimes, in the face of all that is hard, all that challenges us and those we love, sometimes the only thing we can say and the only question we can ask is the Divine Name.

Friends, it’s no coincidence that John the Baptist’s ministry comes out of the wilderness, that his cry of preparation and repentance comes from the desert. In scripture, wilderness has ever and always been the place of chaos. For faithful Jews, it was also the place of covenant formation for God’s people. Wilderness was that place out of which God brought divine reordering. John’s ministry of preparation for Messiah continues salvation history and the tradition of God’s dealings with covenant people. It should come as no surprise that judgment texts fall every year at this time in Advent. This is a call for *today*, for us, in our places of chaos and out-of-control and hard times. The call is to repentance, and the way leads through wilderness, which is always a time and place to reform and re-order. When repentance and forgiveness are available, judgment is good news.

Today, as we approach our act of writing on spirals, I would challenge you to think about what needs changing. What needs changing in you? What needs changing in the world? The radical thing about the Christian theology of repentance is that we don’t just repent for the sake of our own personal salvation. That is well and good and as it should be. But ancient Jews and Christians were less concerned about personal guilt than they were for collective guilt. John’s call to repent wasn’t just for the sake of personal salvation. His call was to the nation as a whole, for the sake of the world. As you approach writing on your spiral today, consider how your personal repentance might also impact the judgment of the world. “When repentance and forgiveness are available, judgment is good news.” And they always are.

[Return to sermon page](#)

[Return to Home Page](#)