



“Changing the Routine”
Scripture – Malachi 3: 1- 7
Sermon Preached by Thomas R. Stout
Sunday, December 6, 2015

The more I read and listen to Malachi, the more fascinated I have become with what he has to say, and how he says it. In just 55 verses (the total length of the entire book) there are 22 questions. Why questions? Because the times called for them. Those days in the restored kingdom of Judah were days full of contradictions. And that, I believe, makes this prophecy a good construct for people of faith in our day and times. The situation for Malachi was this...he lived among a people who lived between two extremes: indifference on the one hand, and cynicism on the other. And both of those attitudes dealt with the presence of God in the history and times of God’s people. Isn’t that also where you and I live: in days of tumult, violence, and the unpredictable? And, I am beginning to feel that you and I live in a very similar place: also between indifference and cynicism.

On the indifference side of things, let me begin by asking a fairly innocuous question. Look where you are sitting in this wonderful sanctuary. How long have you been sitting in the place where you are sitting this morning, and when was the last time you sat in some other place? When I worship out there, among you, I usually sit over there in the East Transept. I like it. I know some of the other people who sit there, and it is “fragrance free.” But what about the rest of this room? What about all those other folks? What about a better place for sight and sound? And what does where I sit have to do with my experience of the presence of the Holy, of God? Or is it just familiar? In this very simple question, I want to suggest that we begin to uncover the issue of indifference in our day. I like where I am, and we like what we have, and let’s just keep it that way.

Cynicism in our day? Listening to *WHYY*, one of the NPR stations in our area, on Wednesday evening, the night of the horrific shooting in San Bernardino, I caught the tail end of a report with a startling statistic. The reporter said that through the 334 days in 2015, there have been 331 mass shootings. A mass shooting, she said, is defined as a shooting incident in which four or more people have been killed. I think that is a statistic for our world, but could it have been just for our country? Here in Wilmington, on the same day the “New Journal” reported the death of a man shot back in November, so that makes it now a person has been killed by gun violence in every month of this year in our city. What has happened to my prayers that gun violence be stopped in our city and our nation? Is anyone listening “out there?” “Up there?” “In here?” And what is the use of protests, and meetings, and new groups being formed and letters to government officials? Where is the mercy and protection of the Divine, of God, for the creation? That contributes to the birth of cynicism.

In Malachi the indifference came because everything had returned to “normal” back in Judah and Jerusalem. The exiles to Babylon were back home; the walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt; the Temple of the Lord was once again standing (although not quite as grand as in Solomon’s day); and offerings and prayers were happening on a regular basis, even some of the old “skimming” practices seem to have returned among the priests and temple

workers. Things had been running smoothly long enough now that the peoples' observance of the statutes and ordinances of the Lord were showing significant signs of slippage. After all, everything was "okay", so surely God would understand a few...shall we say "oversights." Thus the rise of indifference.

This sense of "security" was leading right into cynicism. If we can let things slide, well what about God? Does Yahweh really care how the Sabbath is kept; or how orphans and widows and strangers are cared for? Do you begin to catch my point? And it was into just this situation that our prophet, Malachi, came with his words. How do you get people's attention? How does anything ever change for the better?

Well listen again:

*"See, I am sending you my messenger...
But who can endure the day of his coming. And who can stand when he appears?
For he is like a refiners fire, and like (the astringency) of fuller's soap ²"*

And near the lessons end, with these words:

*Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes...
Return to me, says the Lord, and I will return to you.
But you say: How shall we return?⁷*

I think the historical record shows that for Malachi the people who least expected to have to change are the very ones who had to change. They had to start asking questions of themselves and of their leaders. Indeed, how do we return God to the center in the work and worship of God's people without first questioning where we are?

Move forward a few hundred years, to the time of the Romans and Herod and Tiberius and Pontius Pilate. People then were still looking for something to happen, someone to come and change things, somehow to change the routine of indifference and cynicism. And who came? John the Baptizer, and you know his story. For what did John call? He used words like those we heard from Malachi and Isaiah: prepare, make straight, purify, refine. And who heard? The crowd, ordinary people, some of whom probably liked where they sat. They, we, are the ones to whom to put these questions. Then to ask the same questions of others. And that will challenge the routine. When we risk doing that, we begin to overcome indifference and cynicism. Plus, there is more. There is hope, even as Malachi proclaimed. There is another coming again, the very one whom God has already sent to us. This is the One for whom we look and long for in these days of Advent. He is the one who truly changed things once, and he is the One who ever changes the routine. And He will do it over and over again until all have returned.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, once again, we come to you following a mass killing. Are you weeping for the lives cut short and the suffering of their loved ones? Or, are you merely disgusted with the depth of depravity to which humans can descend? How could parents drop off their precious six-month old child and embark on a suicide mission? How could minds be so radicalized that they demonize co-workers who have shown them kindness? How could hearts be so filled with hatred that they justify murdering innocent people at a holiday party?

God of Creation, in this season of the year when the hours of darkness increase and the hours of light decrease, nature reflects the grisly scenes smearing our planet. The darkness bred by fanaticism, bigotry, racism, enmity, and revenge encroaches on the light of justice, compassion, respect, generosity, and peace.

God, will our flags be perpetually at half-mast?

DELIVER US FROM EVIL

May your light of love penetrate hearts that are overcome by hostility;

may your light of truth pierce minds overcome by zealotry;

and may your light of hope seep into souls overcome by despair.

Mighty God, we know that you do not control our actions. You give us freedom to decide how we will behave. May we take steps to thwart the actions of those who choose violence. May we take strong steps to make our communities safer. May we be steadfast in the face of evil, even when it requires deadly force to prevent further loss of life, but may we never lose the desire to live in ways that enhance, rather than destroy life. And may we never abandon our pursuit of justice and peace.

Gracious God, as we share this sacred meal together, we pray that it will draw us closer to each other,

deepen our bond with you

and bolster our determination to be your ambassadors of light.

Now, our voices become one as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, "Our Father, who art in heaven..."