

Second Sunday Of Advent – John Brittingham

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

It is Peace Week this Advent, so we're going to talk about peace.

But first, a story: in the early winter of 1969, a community service organization known as the New York Young Lords began what is known as “The Church Offensive.” Recognizing that there were serious material needs in their community, the Young Lords decided to do something about it. The Young Lords were predominantly members of the Puerto Rican diaspora living in New York City (although there was a chapter in Chicago as well) so they focused on the needs of their Latinx community in East Harlem or, as it was called at the time, *El Barrio*. One thing that the Young Lords noted in their research about the needs of their community was that churches held a central place in community life. In fact, while the Young Lords were initially hesitant to partner with churches, they found that many churches in *El Barrio* were engaged in service to their community. Such a record of service was not the case with the First Spanish Methodist Church of East Harlem.

First Spanish Methodist had an interesting history. It was a church that was attended primarily by those who had wholly embraced assimilation into mainstream (read: white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) American culture. Few to none of the members of the church actually lived in East Harlem, so the congregation was largely unaware of anything going on with their community. Most important for this story, though, the First Spanish Methodist Church of East Harlem was only open on Sunday mornings for services and was completely closed for the rest of the week. It was essentially a vacant building for the majority of its time, even as it was located squarely in the heart of *El Barrio*. So the Young Lords decided to ask the church if they can use their building during the week. All they wanted to do was to provide breakfast for children, collect and distribute clothing for those who needed warm clothes during the cold months, and conduct education classes for members of their community. Their meeting did not go well.

At first the Young Lords asked to meet with the pastor, and he flatly refused to allow them use of the building—mostly because he didn't like the Young Lords' rhetoric and attire. Refusing to take no for an answer, these determined *boricuas* decide they will start attending services at First Spanish Methodist. On the one hand, this sounds great. On the other hand, imagine St. Paul's getting 150 extra people showing up every Sunday and speaking up during every single testimony time. It would...change things. They were unprepared for double their church membership to show up asking for something they didn't see was needed; they were not prepared to see the need.

Almost 50 years ago to the day, the Young Lords decided to speak up in church during the testimony and the pastor called the cops on them. A fight broke out in the church and 13 people were arrested. Still, even after that, the Young Lords kept attending meetings and services, kept asking to use the building, kept trying to make clear that all they wanted to do was give kids breakfast and warm coats for winter. They were vigilant in trying to model a kind of listening to the concerns of others that they hadn't seen in other community justice groups, but the church congregation they were working with was not prepared to hear them.

So they took the building, and for 11 days they served breakfast and distributed clothing and provided entertainment events for the residents of *El Barrio*. After 11 days the police arrested them all and shut down the church offensive. But something worked, because after the church occupation ceased, all charges against the Young Lords were dropped and the church became known as “The People’s Church,” even if it didn’t officially change its name. The church was unprepared to hear the Young Lords’ request, preparing the way for someone other than who was in need.¹

Our lectionary readings this week emphasize being prepared. Or, to be more specific, preparing the way for the Lord. During this Advent Season we are encouraged to prepare ourselves for God’s arrival. We are to be in a time of waiting and contemplation as we long for the coming of the Messiah. And, yes, we are surrounded by a cultural context that begins preparing us for Santa Season long before we’ve even finished with Halloween. And yes, if “the culture” were more attentive to orthodox Christianity we wouldn’t have so much Christmas stuff around when it’s not even Christmastime yet...I get it. (Stop singing about a baby when it ain’t even born yet!) In this time of preparation and contemplation, I want to ask a question: Who or what are we preparing the way for?

Our reading from **Malachi** is all about a messenger preparing the way. Indeed, as Nyasha Junior notes in her commentary on the passage, “the name Malachi means ‘my messenger’ in Hebrew.”² Someone is coming with the goal of preparing the way of the Lord. They are God’s mouthpiece, bringing a message of purification through fire, a fire that refines and returns the world to order. *But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears?*, our passage asks. Who can withstand the fires of refinement which test us and provide means for becoming more fully who we already are and are becoming? This messenger is not coming with “tidings of great joy” or with jingling bells and happy images of polar bears drinking soda. No, this is a message that will hurt before it helps. This is a message of self-critique, a message of refinement. A message that calls for metanoia, turning around. Prepare yourselves to be changed.

This kind of refinement is not to be equated with being fancy or elite or upper class or espousing ideals of professionalism. This kind of refinement requires genuinely listening to what is coming, whether that is pleasant or not. It is not unlike the kind of refinement that happens when you filter your coffee. Without filtration, without refinement, you would be left drinking bitter bean chunk water. Instead, you wait and strain and filter out the chunks, until you have the next best thing to eating from the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden.

Sometimes, however, I must confess that I am tempted to avoid this refining fire. I suspect that I am not alone in this. Sometimes we are tempted to put out every single fire that could possibly arise. We avoid any and all conflict and confuse that with peace. But this peace, the absence of any conflict whatsoever, is not the kind of peace that is spoken of in our passages for today’s service. Avoiding conflict at all costs is tantamount to being ruled by fear. Fear of any fires emerging, fear that we cannot trust our communities, our neighbors, our God to provide a way through. We miss the message and the messenger when we hide from any and all conflict and when we embrace our entrenched positions without conversation, without paying attention. If we

¹ <https://soundcloud.com/themagnificast/ep-66-the-church-offensive>

² https://www.huffingtonpost.com/nyasha-junior/malachi-3-1-4-who-is-the-messenger_b_2244486.html

think that God only speaks through those we assume to be their mouthpiece, or if we are afraid that anything other than a message of “with the status quo I am well pleased” is God’s desire, we stand a good chance of missing the work that God has already started among us. In this season of Advent, we must prepare ourselves to see, prepare ourselves to listen, and prepare ourselves to be wrong.

As we turn to our Gospel reading(s) we see a development on this theme of preparing the way and being, ourselves, prepared for the Lord’s coming. Our first **Luke** reading is the song of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist. The song begins by testifying to God’s favor on Israel by providing them a messiah who will save them from the hands of their enemies. Yet what this salvation entails is rather different than mere rescue. Instead, Zechariah testifies to the ways that God has *rescued [us] from the hands of our enemies, [that we] might serve him without fear*. Did you get that? We are rescued *from* something and *for* something. Our liberation is liberation *from* the hands of our enemies, and liberation *for* service without fear.

As with the Malachi passage, Zechariah’s song makes clear that we are to be prepared for something. We are to prepare the way for service without fear of small fires springing up everywhere, fear of our enemies, and so on. We are liberated for pursuing the true peace of God. As one commenter I read this week mentioned, “Salvation necessitates a change from the status quo ... otherwise we have nothing to be saved from or for. Only those who are discontent with the current state of things long for salvation.”³ It has been my experience that it is often those of us who are most comfortable with the current state of things, even if we make gestures towards being discontent, who are the ones to dismiss the critique of those crying out in the wilderness. Such voices are often labeled as troublemakers, rabble-rousers, contrarians, and fire-starters. If I am comfortable with the world as it is currently constructed, I can go to great lengths to justify plugging my ears when John the Baptist, the NYC Young Lords, LGBTQ persons, and other marginalized groups speak up. I can even go so far as to claim that I am preparing the way of the Lord while ignoring the cries of God’s people. It’s not that bad...we’re working on it...these things take time...

We see this kind of justification occurring all over the place even during this time of “peace on earth” and “goodwill to all.” We see this justification for non-action or willful non-listening when we dismiss the cries of our Jewish brothers and sisters claiming that anti-semitism is on the rise, or when we see protections for impoverished persons being removed. We are complicit in justifying non-action when we ignore the cries of those in the wilderness of Tornillo, Texas, begging for freedom from the cages that hold them, or those on the island of Puerto Rico who ask that their basic needs be considered before *La Junta* (the appointed fiscal control board that oversees the entire island) considers the desires of those who want to collect on PR’s debt. We are complicit in our refusal to listen when we hear the voice of one in the wilderness crying out “Black lives matter” and we respond with “Yeah, well, so does mine, buddy.” We are complicit when we recognize the problems with the status quo and choose to protect our interests and our ears when cries for help are pretty explicit. We are complicit when we refuse, whether by direct, indirect, or non- action, to prepare a place at the table for those out in the wilderness.

³ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/advent2c>

Such is the case with our final reading from the 3rd chapter of Luke's gospel. Here, rather than getting a little cuddly baby version of John, we get John the Baptist. When he speaks, he's angry. When he speaks, he speaks with the words of a prophet in the wilderness, not with the voice of hierarchical, hegemonic power. The structure of our gospel passage itself makes explicit this contrast between the powers of institutional authority (Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Annas and Caiaphas all filling this role) and John the son of Zechariah wandering around in the wilderness. As some have said, the wilderness functions as a place of both being lost and being in a place of God's provision. It is a place where one moves from enslavement to liberation; where one goes to be changed and continue changing.⁴ It is the opposite of an imperial throne or a high-rise corner office.

Angry John the Baptist is calling for a change. He is calling for the crooked paths to be made straight and the rough places to be made smooth. He is calling for a transformation of the social order and he is doing so not with the voice of institutional authority but with the voice of one who takes on the mantle of prophet. Prepare the way for the Lord, prepare the way for God's kingdom. See and hear what the Lord is already doing and who they are doing it through. See and hear that God is speaking not through those who have institutional authority, not through those who are people of power, prestige, and recognizable excellence. God speaks through those who are in the wilderness—those who feel lost, those who rely on God's provision because the society to which they belong fails to offer adequate provision.

During Advent we wait and we long for another kind of world to be born. We long for a change to the status quo. We who are lost, we who wander through our own wildernesses, we yearn for liberation from want, from our sin, from bearing the consequences of the sins of others. We yearn for no children to go without food or shelter, for no women and femmes to be met with violence and dehumanization, for those in power to be liberated from rule by fear. But perhaps most importantly during Advent, we prepare ourselves for a time when: *By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

⁴ Ibid.