

Reflection December 8th

Malachi 3: 1-4

Luke 3: 1-6

Julie Lees

Title: WAKING UP TO PEACE

Prayer: Wake us up, God – to hear you whisper in our ear, and to be moved by your presence in our lives. Use us in ways that help bring peace today. Amen.

“Prepare the way.”

Here we are on Peace Sunday and our theme is Wake Up to Peace and both passages are saying to us: Prepare the Way.

Us? We’re the ones to prepare the way?

Isn’t that someone else’s job? No matter what “prepare the way” means. That’s not our work to do.

Surely, it’s the job of our leaders; or the job of some coalition or a corporation. But not us. Not our job.

We aren’t powerful enough. Influential enough. Strong enough.

I’m just one person. You’re just one person.

And yet, we might be called to help prepare the way.

The Book of Malachi is very short, only four chapters. And, yet within it, we read of six disputes between the people and God.

Malachi lived about 100 years after the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon. The Temple had been rebuilt for quite some time, and his message was directed at the folks living in Jerusalem.

Seemingly they had high hopes when they returned from exile. They thought all the promises the prophets had uttered would come true, the messiah would come, justice

and peace would be restored and they'd live with a sense of unity, of wholeness – of shalom – once more.

This didn't happen.

It seemed the people were acting unfaithfully to God just as their ancestors had at times. Folks who lived in the city experienced poverty, corruption and injustice. And they were dishonouring God with their poor and disrespectful worship practices.

In the disputes that Malachi recounts, the people can't see how God loves them; they feel neglected, and they don't understand that they have had a part to play in how things are going for them. It doesn't matter that God says "I love you" or "I do not change." They can't believe it.

So Malachi says that the messenger of the Lord is coming ... the messenger of the covenant is coming. But, it's not going to be easy. The message is not going to be pretty – it's going to be about having to change our ways, face judgment. It'll be like fuller's soap – soap so strong it can bleach clothes; it'll be like a refiner's fire – fire so hot it can melt silver.

This is going to be uncomfortable.

Did you notice that Malachi calls the messenger, the messenger of the covenant?

And what is that covenant?

God makes covenants with us. Throughout time we have been asked to be in covenantal relationship with God ... and throughout time God has kept the covenant and we have not.

Think of God's covenant with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. These were oaths, arrangements, contracts, relationships. Some covenants were conditional like God's covenant with Moses "if you obey the laws and follow my commands there will be blessings; if you disobey there will be consequences."

Some covenants were unconditional like God's covenant with David that there would be someone from the line of David sitting in the seat of power no matter what. (Little did anyone know at the time, that power would manifest as an itinerant preacher sharing the little that he owned, and speaking of love, not dominance).

Bottom line – in all the covenants God offers love. In every covenant evolution we are reminded that God will not let us go. We belong to God, we are God's beloved.

And our part of the deal? That we have steadfast love for God and that we have knowledge of God. We are told to "love the Lord your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (*Moses [Deut] and Jesus [Mtt, Mark]*)

We are to live that kind of knowledge and love.

So ... the messenger of the covenant. The messenger who will let us know that God still loves us, that we still belong to God?

For Christians that's John the Baptist.

Now remember when Malachi said "but who's going to be able to stand it when this guy shows up? He's going to be harsh like fuller's soap and he's going to make us melt in a refiner's fire." True to his word, the first recorded words John says to folks in the gospel of Luke is "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

Yikes.

This doesn't sound like the peace, love and grooviness of cool-dude Jesus.

That's because it's not.

That's because God's covenants aren't always easy.

That's because it's hard for us. It's hard to keep our part of the covenant, the relationship. We get bogged down in the humanness of our lives. We get selfish, crave things like power and influence, we get tired, deflated, fed up, apathetic.

We want someone else to take care of things. Surely peace is the job of our leaders; or the job of some coalition or a corporation. Not ours. Not our job.

Luke begins the passage we read today with the names of seven leaders and their jurisdictions. He's showing us who is in charge. There is the Emperor of Rome – Tiberius; Pontius Pilate – a governor in Rome with jurisdiction over Judea, Samaria

and Idumea; then the remainder of the kingdom – all those hard regional names Julia had to pronounce! – led by Herod and his family; and finally, the religious leaders Anna and Caiaphas who yielded power and influence through their offices.

And yet, in this particular story, the word of God doesn't come to them, it comes to John. A man wandering about in the wilderness. With all these people in leadership positions it's John who has been tasked with being a messenger of the Lord.

The stories in the bible show us that God sometimes chooses people who seem insignificant in terms of the power play dynamic. John is wandering in the wilderness, Mary is unwed and pregnant, the shepherds smell and are low on the economic ladder. God sometimes chooses people that seem easy for the world to ignore.

And, yet they are chosen to stand up, stand out and speak. They may be ignored, they may be ridiculed, they may fail in their task, but they are still asked to stand up and speak.

People in positions of power and influence are also called to change the world, to save the world, restore the world, wake up the world. And, often they serve with sacrificial hearts. Whether we agree with their policies or not, the demands of their jobs come at great personal cost and they constantly have to negotiate and navigate a terrain that is not always kind.

God speaks through all of us.

What if the Luke passage was written today? It might read something like...

In the 24th year of the 21st century of the reign of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau; when David Eby was Premier of British Columbia; and Mike Little was Mayor of the District of North Vancouver; during the sacred call of moderator Carmen Lansdowne; the word of the Lord came to Janie / Doug / Mechel / Dave / Sheila / Ed / Eva / Scott in the land of Highlands United Church on the North Shore of the lower mainland....

... "they went into all the region around the North Shore proclaiming the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

In that story we would be tasked with preparing the way of the Lord. It wouldn't be left for anyone else to do, it would be us.

“Prepare the way.”

Isn't that someone else's job?

Surely, it's the job of our leaders; or the job of some coalition or a corporation. But not us. Not our job.

We aren't powerful enough. Influential enough. Strong enough.

I'm just one person. You're just one person.

And yet, we might be called to help prepare the way.

On Peace Sunday when the theme is Wake Up to Peace; what does preparing the way look like for us? Not for the world leaders, but for us.

Maybe it starts with reflecting on what is broken in our own lives and doing the work to restore it. Broken relationships, broken family ties, broken career paths ... made whole.

Maybe it starts with consciously taking one risk a week, a day – extending our hand to help or speaking out when we don't know what the outcome will be.

Maybe it starts with gratitude. Taking time to be thankful for one or all the blessings God has laid at our feet, then seeing our community from that perspective.

Maybe it starts with renewing our covenant with God every day – using our whole body, mind and soul to love God and to know God.

Even if the world were to collapse around us, peace can still start with us. We can still choose to see with eyes of peace, hear with ears of peace, speak with mouths of peace and love with hearts of peace.

God can speak through us. We are powerful enough. We are influential enough. We are strong enough ... because we are God's covenantal people and we belong to God.

Peace be with you.

Amen.