

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-6

Philippians 1:3-11

“You give light to those who sit in darkness,  
and in the shadow of death.

Guide our feet into the way of peace.” AMEN!

Pastor Betsy last week led us into  
the season of Advent with a  
profound message of hope.

It is my turn now to welcome you further  
into the mud room with a message of peace.

You know the mud room right?

That small area usually at the back door  
where one can hang their coat and put away  
their shoes.

We recently enclosed an area in the garage  
with real walls and a door.

We have a real mud room now and  
since it has a fresh coat of paint,  
some new shelves for laundry detergent  
and a little storage chest to sit on,  
I have commented a couple times  
that it's my favorite room in  
the house! :-)

Advent is sort of like the mud room you go through to get to Christmas.

It's an entry way, a vestibule, a place to take off coats and boots as you prepare to enter the home.

And like most entryways, it is not a place where anyone wants to linger.

Yet, this place demands the attention it deserves because it is more than just a pass through.

The weeks of Advent are a beautiful, holy, hopeful, peaceful, and a prayerful season of the Christian calendar.

Though many wish to rush through Advent to get to Christmas, we pause in that space.

For those willing to be attentive and preparatory, well, the rewards are eternal. (Pause)

“There's a story about a group of tourists who were visiting the Vatican in Rome.

Their tour guide told them all about the

famed Sistine Chapel: the place where  
the College of Cardinals meets when  
they're choosing the next pope.

It's a historic chamber whose painted ceiling is  
one of Michelangelo's masterpieces -  
the entire [Biblical] story in pictures,  
from Adam and Eve to Jesus  
being enthroned in the heavens."

One aspect of the Sistine Chapel comes as  
a shock to most first-time visitors:  
its the size.

It is a shockingly small room!

"This particular group of tourists included  
a young man who was so eager  
to see Michelangelo's painted ceiling,  
that he dashed from one end of

the Chapel and out the other before  
he even realized he'd been in the [holy space].

He mistook the chapel as a sort of  
[entryway or vestibule; a mud room].

Somebody had to go after him and  
call him back saying,

“Hey, you missed it.

Come back into the chapel-and this time,  
remember to look up!” :-)

This story encourages us to view Advent  
with the same lesson, to look up.

Amidst the season of weeks where we are  
tempted to rush and gather packages and  
plan/attend parties;

We are trained to check off lists and run errands,  
we linger in Advent.

Not with our eyes cast downward,  
but attentive and looking up.

You all have taken the time to be here and  
to worship online.

You are well aware that this time of year  
is a destination in its own right.

With Malachi’s warning to the temple-worship  
leaders’ coming judgment and  
the question of being ready,

to Paul's words about expectation and conviction  
that will bring good work to completion,

to the Song of Zechariah that we chanted today  
about another prophet God will send -

his name was John the baptizer and  
the last words of the song tells of  
"God guiding our feet into the way of peace"

amidst all these warnings, messengers and gospel,  
we have the opportunity to pause and  
notice what is happening around us  
and become infused with peace. (Pause)

In Malachi, the writer believed to be a priest  
in the temple, noticed things weren't going well.

The people were allowed to come home  
from captivity in Babylon when

Cyrus, the Persian King, liberated them.  
But it's not all candies and nuts.

Israel, and Jerusalem, were still controlled  
by a foreign government.

The temple authorities had aligned themselves  
with the Persian government.

Cheating, lying, oppression and exclusion  
were the orders of the day.

Imagine religious leaders cozying up  
to government officials.

There's a song I'm sure you know.

"You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one I hope someday  
you'll join us

And the world will live as one"

Imagine religious leaders cozying up  
to government officials "It's easy if you try."

Malachi prophesied about a purification  
that was to come.

The purification would cleanse the evil,  
the rough, and the ugly behavior.

It was not an eternal punishment,  
for those who cheat, lie,  
oppressed hire workers and orphans,  
thrust aside immigrants with  
no respect for God.

Purification by fire is painful for the folks in power  
but it is hopeful for the people who  
suffer from their injustice.

The good news is it's not eternal punishment  
but it will require people to recognize  
what is happening.

To look up and see this holy Advent time  
as a time to repent and receive a  
profound message of hope and peace.

“Imagine all the people living life in peace.” (Pause)

This waiting is not a passive time  
for us who are attentive.

It's a partnering time to prepare  
the way of the Lord,  
just like John the baptizer who cried out  
in the wilderness.

Sure, he was in the desert wilderness,  
but it was also a time of upheaval.

“In the wilderness” can mean both a place  
and a time... a time of upheaval.

Today, many Christian leaders are in cahoots  
with the government officials,  
each of them scratching the other's back.

Like Luke chapter 3, today is a time of upheaval.

It's enough to make one question God's ability  
to set things right; to question  
"where is the God of justice?"

It's the question written just before  
the Malachi reading, too.

The messenger sent by God  
reminds us to look up, listen, and remember.

To repent while recognizing what is happening  
and be transformed toward the kingdom of God  
as an act of strength -

these are the exact times when God does  
something miraculous even amidst the hustle  
and bustle of the weeks before Christmas.

God, through the action of Advent people,  
takes something rough, ugly, and evil and

refines and purifies to make it  
to be precious, usable and beautiful.



And it goes a little something like this.

There was a bicycle shop in a little town  
that was constantly busy with the run-up  
to Christmas.

On this particular day, a young boy wandered  
into the shop.

He was dirty faced, poorly dressed, and  
obviously not from a well-to-do family.

At first the staff was worried he might  
shoplift something, but soon it became clear  
that he was just looking around.

He'd come in, peruse the new bicycles  
that were waiting to be bought as Christmas gifts,  
and then stand out of the way to watch  
the repair people work.

One day, after a large group of customers left  
with their purchases he made a beeline over  
to the repair shop side of the business.

He laid a rusty old bolt on the counter in front of them.

"Excuse me," he said politely,

“can you put a new bike on this bolt?”

Like us, the men there laughed at what he said.

Only a child would think of  
putting a bike on a bolt instead of  
a bolt on a bike.

Like ours, the laughter wasn't intended  
to be mean or harmful, but the little boy  
was cut to the quick.

He didn't understand, but he knew  
he'd said something wrong so he backed out  
and left the shop.

The employees tried to catch him  
but he was gone.

About a week later he came back.

This time, though he was even more reluctant  
to make eye contact with anyone in the store,  
but the girl at the counter saw him and  
she let the repair shop know he was back.

One of the guys called to him,  
“Hey kid!” The boy looked up.

“You forgot your bolt the other day.”

And with that he wheeled out and presented  
the boy a bicycle built entirely out of scrap parts  
that the workers had salvaged on  
their own time. (Pause)

Linger in the mud room of Advent, and  
we will find peace.

Not the kind the world promises but  
the kind God delivers.

AMEN!