

“WHO CAN ENDURE THE DAY OF HIS COMING?”

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

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During last week’s touching farewell to our nation’s 41st President, I recalled that on one occasion I actually met George Herbert Walker Bush – and it wasn’t at a Houston Astros game! Back in 1988, when he was the Vice-President running for President, Mr. Bush came to Jackson, Mississippi, to launch his campaign in that state. The chairman of his Mississippi campaign committee happened to be a member of the church I was then serving in Jackson. This man asked me to deliver the invocation at a luncheon where Mr. Bush would be present to greet his supporters. I circled the date on my calendar and looked forward to it with great anticipation. It didn’t matter whether I was a Republican or a Democrat; this was an opportunity to meet the Vice-President of the United States and play a tiny role in a huge election.

When the day finally arrived, I wasn’t disappointed. Mr. Bush was truly a larger-than-life figure, but he was also as humble and gracious as last week’s eulogizers made him out to be. After the luncheon he shook my hand, thanked me for my prayer and for my ministry as a pastor, and posed with me for a keepsake photograph. The fact is, he left everyone in the room that day feeling more valuable and hopeful. When George H. W. Bush came to town, the reality lived up to the expectation.

The Advent season signals the coming of God into the world in a new and decisive way – in the person of Jesus Christ. During Advent we look backward to Christ’s coming two thousand years ago as the babe of Bethlehem; we look forward to Christ’s coming again as the triumphant Lord of the universe; and we celebrate Christ’s coming here and now into the humdrum and stress of our daily lives. This is why Advent is a time of such high expectation. The One who is coming can do what no politician, public servant, or preacher has ever been able to do – to set things right in the world once and for all; to reconcile human beings to God and to one another; to inaugurate a new age of peace, justice, and righteousness. This is why the day of Christ’s appearing in the 1st Century was a day of such joy and hope. The day of Christ’s appearing at the end of history will be even more so. And the day of Christ’s appearing in our own day and time is, as the angel outside Bethlehem puts it, “good news of great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10). That’s the expectation; but what is the reality?

Well, the Scripture lessons for this 2nd Sunday of Advent offer a mixed message. In the reading from Luke 1, the old priest Zechariah goes to the temple to dedicate his newborn son John, who later would be called “the Baptizer.” Zechariah recognizes that his little boy will grow up to be the forerunner of Israel’s Messiah. Bursting into song, the priest announces that God is at last fulfilling his ancient promise: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us” (1:68a-69) . . . “that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve [God] without fear” (1:73). This is Zechariah’s account of the coming of God in Jesus Christ, and it is nothing but joyful and hopeful.

But when we hear today's other two Scripture lessons, it's hard to imagine how you and I could anticipate God's coming with gladness and "serve God without fear." Two chapters later in Luke's Gospel, the adult John the Baptist fulfills the role his father envisions for him. John proclaims the coming of the Messiah; but, contrary to expectations, his is not a "feel-good" message. John is a tough-talking preacher who condemns his own people as "a brood of vipers" and warns them of "the wrath to come" (3:7). When the Messiah arrives, John says, he will chop down every tree that doesn't bear good fruit and toss it into the fire (3:9). He will baptize the people, not with water, but "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (3:16).

And if that isn't enough fire for you, listen again to today's Old Testament lesson. A man named Malachi prophesies during the period when Israel has returned home from exile but is still living under the rule of the Persian Empire. He, too, speaks to his people of a coming Messiah. But notice: in one breath, he describes this future savior as "a messenger of the covenant in whom you delight" (Malachi 3:1b). Then in the next breath he asks, "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire" (3:2). Did you catch it? There's that image of fire again – and all of a sudden, the Messiah doesn't sound so delightful! Of course, the purpose of his fire is to purify the temple priesthood; but it is still fire, and fire is destructive and painful.

Friends, how do you like that as an image for Advent, as a prelude to a "Merry Christmas"? As December 25 approaches, you and I are expecting the warm glow of candlelight; but what we get is a raging fire! We're expecting Christ to come to us in comfort and mercy; but the reality is that Christ also comes to us in confrontation and judgment.

Looking back over my 42 years in the ministry, I see that I have tried to teach myself and the people I've served how to recognize and respond to mercy. But I have never taught myself or others how to recognize and respond to judgment. If these Advent texts are still relevant today, they suggest that we, no less than our biblical ancestors, stand under divine judgment. If I'm starting to sound like a fire and brimstone preacher and you want to run screaming for the exits, you have that choice. Or you can choose to hear me out and experience Advent in a different way this year.

Let's start by asking: What does God's judgment look like when it comes? How do we know when we are under judgment? Well, here are the facts. Many people today exhibit the same moral laxity that the biblical prophets cried out against in their time – the view that freedom and tolerance are the highest human values; therefore, "anything goes." Likewise, many are consumed by materialism and its ugly twin brother, greed. The French philosopher Jacques Ellul once observed that "the only ideal the West cherishes is economic growth." Why else would a chain of radio stations instruct its newscasters not to elaborate on the possibility of stormy weather because it might be bad for business? In our society we judge people by what they have and not by what they are.

And where does our materialism and greed actually get us? We are the most affluent people the world has ever known, but we are also "world leaders" in addictive behaviors, mental illness, and suicide. Many of us feel a yawning divide between the "good life" we long for and the actual life we experience.

To make matters worse, our society as a whole is also deeply divided. People with axes to grind are everywhere; belligerence is the prevailing mood; mistrust and suspicion are rampant. A depressing variety of gaps separate us one from the other. We have a way of talking past each other rather to or with each other.

It doesn't take a GPS to see where all of this ultimately leads. With sickening frequency some people resort to violence to express a grudge or get what they want. But let's be honest: the rest of us bear some responsibility for all this mayhem. You and I become hardened to violence, don't we? Our arousal point keeps getting higher and higher. Even when finally aroused we cannot sustain our indignation very long. I read about a man who said that ours is a three-day society. He meant that when something ghastly tragic happens it is headlined the first day; reduced to the back section the second day; and confined to a squib the third day. By the fourth day, we've washed it out of our minds. Meanwhile, we keep playing word games with violence. When hardened criminals and crazies do it, it's violence; but when military and legal authorities do it, it's a legitimate expression of force. And all of it is a farce when compared to the ways of the Prince of Peace.

So these are the facts: "we, the people" are divided within ourselves and among ourselves. The accepted explanations are helpful as far as they go, but they don't reach far enough. We typically blame our problems on demographic changes that make it harder for us to live together peaceably; or on technological advances that have whisked us out of the familiar into the new and left us unprepared; or on institutions that were meant to serve us but have become fossilized and insensitive.

However, there is a further explanation for what is happening to us. The prophets Malachi and John would say that we are suffering for our sins. The accepted explanations that are so in vogue today have one thing in common: they leave out the moral factor and overlook human sin. It's not that the horizontal factors should be ignored. They are there and they are real. But they are not the only forces at work in history. Human beings can sin! God can judge! And judgment can happen within history as well as at the end of history. It is possible for a people, despite their lofty self-image, to exhaust the divine patience and experience the consequences of their sin. And so, even at the risk of sounding like an ancient prophet reincarnated as Jerry Falwell, I'll just come out and say it: we are a people under divine judgment. Our divided hearts and divided society testify to the bankruptcy of a God-flouting, self-centered way of life.

So what do we do if we are, in fact, under judgment? We can recognize that such is the case and stop trying to define our situation apart from it. And maybe if we kept in mind that we are all in this pressure cooker together, we would be a little easier on each other – instead of going around short-fused and irritable.

On the weekend before the recent midterm elections, *Saturday Night Live* cast member Pete Davidson made one of his regular appearances on the show's "Weekend Update" segment. Davidson made fun of several candidates for their physical appearance, but one in particular struck a nerve. While showing a picture of Republican congressional candidate Dan Crenshaw, who lost an eye while serving in Afghanistan, Davidson made a joke about Crenshaw's eye patch. When the joke fell short, Davidson followed up with, "He lost his eye in war, or

whatever.” Many felt that his comment demeaned Crenshaw’s service and was disrespectful to veterans in general.

In response to the controversy, *SNL* invited Dan Crenshaw to appear on the show the Saturday following the midterms for both a public apology and the opportunity to get in a few scripted jabs at Pete Davidson in return. Crenshaw had every reason to express a sense of injustice and outrage over how he had been portrayed, but what he actually said was something very different. After gracefully accepting Davidson’s apology, he added this coda: “There are lots of lessons to learn here. Not just that the left and the right can still agree on some things, but also this: Americans can forgive one another. We can remember what brings us together as a country and still see the good in each other.” How remarkable is that? It was a rare scene of forgiveness and reconciliation played out in the public sphere. It also served as a model for all of us who want to clean up our hearts and our relationships and restore civility to public debate.

And so, you and I come to another Advent season wishing for comfort, or forgiveness, or a restored relationship with God – forgetting that we have to pass through a “refiner’s fire” to receive these gifts. We ignore the fact that God’s ultimate purpose for us is that we will become holy, pure, and clean.

In his book, *Letters to Malcolm*, C.S. Lewis envisions showing up at the gates of heaven. Lewis asks: “Would it not break the heart if God said to us, ‘It is true, my [child], that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you. Enter into the joy.’? Should we not reply, ‘With submission, sir, and if there is no objection, I’d rather be cleaned first’? To which God would say, ‘It may hurt, you know.’ And we would reply, ‘Even so, sir.’”

Friends, if you and I really desire to be at peace within ourselves and at peace with one another, we can do what John the Baptist calls people to do two millennia ago: we can repent and get back in integrity with God. It’s not just judgment we are under, it’s divine judgment. And this is our hope, for God’s judgment is not vindictive but restorative and curative. It moves always in the direction of reconciliation.

This past week I started serving on a community team called the Juvenile Review Board. I agreed to join the group because I was attracted to its mission. When a teenager gets into trouble with the law, the usual procedure is that he or she is suspended from school, has to appear in court, and emerges from the crisis with a stained record. The Juvenile Review Board offers an alternative to this path of judgment, isolation, and shame. A young offender can choose to appear before the Board, receive counsel, and agree to certain conditions that will place him or her on the path to reconciliation and renewal – conditions which include making apologies and reparations. Instead of being marked for life, the youth is offered new life.

Now, this may sound like a novel way to handle wrongdoing, but what is novel to us is standard procedure for God. When God judges, God’s intention is not to punish and destroy, but to repair and restore. Can you imagine any better news for people today who are divided within themselves and among themselves? Just as our unrest stems in large measure from divine judgment, so our rest is to be found in divine grace.

“Who can endure the day of his coming?” By our own repentance and by God’s amazing grace, we can all endure.