2nd Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.5.21

Malachi 3:1-4
See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:1-9
In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" (286)

This really happened. That's what I think our gospel writer wants us to understand.

Our gospel writer: tradition has called him Luke. This, likely to call on the man, Luke, whom the Apostle Paul mentioned in two of his letters for being a companion and important in his ministry. But this gospel narrative was written long after Paul's ministry, probably forty or fifty years after, meaning the writer of this gospel might have taken that as a pen name to indicate what tradition he was writing for, what name and persona he was writing as—but it probably wasn't him.

That said, I call our writer here Luke, just as I call the writer of the gospel of Mark, "Mark." Knowing it's unlikely the writers of these books were actually named what tradition claims, I also assume the writers *had* names and we don't know what they were and we have to call them something as we consider not only their books but also their intentions and perspectives as writers so why not go with the names that correspond with their books? I'm a preacher, not a scholar, so I operate with some poetic license, and you're here, not to listen to me defend a dissertation, but to remember that God is at work in the world and, for this, to be renewed in hope. We're allowed a little art in our speech.

But just a little—because, as it happens, Luke wanted us to understand, this really happened, a story that is to be bound by fact, within the bounds of history and historicity, though also utterly breaking those bounds for breaking into those bounds. This thing to which he was

about to testify, this event of God arriving amidst history, first in Jesus, then in the Holy Spirit and, by this, in the church, really happened. It all really happened.

Hence the list of historical figures.

It's a rather long list and so worthy of wondering of it, why?

The answer I've always come up with, and heard come up with, is that we're to hear it as communicating one of Luke's favorite themes, that God is about to work a great reversal. God is about to raise up the lowly and cast down the mighty.

Granted, this is a theme in all the gospels—for it being a theme in the Christ event itself. Jesus, though lowly, though crucified even, executed as a criminal in this most debased manner, is also the Son of God, the Lord and Savior of history.

But for Luke this seems the very heart of the gospel. This great reversal, this which he remembers the girl Mary to have sung about, in regard to God, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty," this is the meaning of Luke's recounting all the important people we heard this morning—that, while the word of the Lord might have come to the emperor Tiberius, or the governor Pontius Pilate, or even the tetrarch Herod, or the high priests Annas and Caiaphas, or even a regular priest like Zachariah, it came instead to a regular priest's son, and one not even in the Temple where he might have been as an apprentice to his father, but to where he was in the wilderness, which would have had none of the romantic loveliness the wilderness might hold for the likes of us, but would have been raw and rough and nearly irredeemable, a place of pre-creation, a place of dangerous, even ugly and violent, chaos: John.

The word of the Lord came to John.

This list is all about the great reversal.

Actually, I've even heard it as a long set-up and a punchy punchline—John. Like in the tv show, *The Good Place*, a show about the afterlife, an existentialist sitcom as it were. In the office of an angel of the afterlife, a portrait hangs, clearly important. It's of a teenager who, in the 70s, when hanging out with his friends (and having consumed some "Magic Mushrooms"), figured out the mystery of existence with "92% accuracy." So now his portrait, which looks as if it was the picture for his high school yearbook, hangs with singular prominence in the Good Place.

Doug is the kid's name—and when it's explained to the rest of the goofballs in the Good Place who that portrait's of (it's of Doug) there's the punchline. You'd think the one to unearth

the mystery of existence would be Plato or Socrates or Homer or Buddha or Jesus or Bach or Shakespeare or Immanuel Kant. But, no, it was Doug.

Just so, the word of the Lord came to John.

See, there's humor in the mixing of the Most High with the utterly ordinary. That Doug's dorky picture hangs in heaven: that's the joke *The Good Place* runs with. It's the joke it runs and runs with through its four brilliant seasons—that heaven is positively littered with frozen yogurt shops, that hell is run by a committee of the most banal business-types.

That's the joke, too, of the Christ event and of Christianity in general and the one Luke especially runs with, and then runs with some more—that the utterly ordinary becomes the host, the hostel, of the Most High God. A joke, so to speak. But if not exactly a funny joke, laugh-out-loud, then that's perhaps because it's also many other things as well. Shocking. Beautiful. Touching. Terrifying. That you could just be walking into your stable one morning and there would be, having just been born, the Son of the Most High God. Yikes.

Which gets us to the something else Luke seems to be suggesting with all this name-dropping, and it's that this really happened. Really, Luke's aim in writing his gospel, in telling his version of the story of Jesus, was to make it clear: this really happened.

Really.

In this way, Christianity is a departure from other mythological systems, their founding narratives, and the "religions" they resulted in. Prior to the faith claims of the church in the 1st century, most other faith claims that we know of found their origins in mythic time or in "time out of mind." But Luke especially wants to insist something of the story he's beginning here to tell. He wants to insist upon us: "This really happened." God really entered history. The transcendent really became imminent, alive among us. The Most High God really deigned to be one of us—so that we might rise to become one with this Most High God. And it happened in a specific place at an actual time, when these actual people were all in charge of running the world. It all happened like this, which we'll hear more over the next couple weeks.

It makes a difference. If you ask me, it makes a difference. If God isn't just one of a pantheon of gods, not to mention demigods and spirits, a whole community above that might bear resemblance to this one below but is more powerful or beautiful or horrible or eternal; if God is rather one, a unity powerfully transcendent while also utterly imminent, joining us in our humanity to live amidst the world, entering history and interacting with historical figures by which

changing history's course: then we're implicated in the playing out of things in a different way, and so is God.

Strange, for all the possible joke of this, there's also something newly serious.

We're all in this together: the Ancient of Days and John and Doug and you and me.

It's not for nothing that the people's response to John when he called them to baptism, the second half of this story which we'll hear next week, was this: "What are we to *do*?" The real fact that God came to the world as we know it, a world full of people we recognize as real and of a time, means something for us, means something for this world and how we're to live in its midst, and that implies that there's something we must do, in response, but what? *So what?*

John has a few suggestions, which we'll hear next week.

For starters, though, there's this: repent.

Repent. Repentance. It sounds scary. It sounds even threatening. This is when you take a good, hard look at yourself and finally admit how bad you are, even sinful you are. But this is a corruption of what's actually meant here. As it happens, it's been the church in its own teaching of this that has contributed most to this corruption—which means the church has as much to repent of as anyone.

Repentance: it's actually a change of mind, a transformation of mind.

The Greek word translated "repentance" is *metanoia, -noia* meaning knowledge and *meta-* meaning behind or beyond or before. It might be useful to hear it in contrast to paranoia, which is a sort of divided mind, a mind divided from itself. *Metanoia* is an expansion of mind. It might also be useful to consider how the church has itself preached a more paranoid version of the story of salvation than a "metanoid" one. The church, in preaching repentance, has made the hope for salvation among the people be about fearing what punishment might await if we don't respond rightly to the promise of salvation, which is paranoid, rather than about hoping and striving toward what goodness and glory already abound when it comes to wholeness in God. Metanoid.

Consider how paranoid some speaking of God is, and then consider how "metanoid" our hope in the Lord might rather be—evoking something grand and magnificent, beautiful and enduring, warm and true, loving and inviting and embracing of us all and all creation. That the church has ever gotten this backward, its preaching paranoid rather than metanoid: its evidence to me of countervailing forces that really don't want love to win.

But it will.

Important to note: repentance is also return, which is how the Hebrew word that gets translated "repentance" is understood—a return to some prior knowledge or truth or way or practice, or summarily to say to return to God.

And it's interesting to me that these two ancient concepts that get translated into current English aren't exactly the same, are in some ways contradictory. The Hebrew shade of meaning for what John's talking about here is backward looking, a tie to history and the past: return. The Greek shade of meaning for what John's talking about here is more forward looking, inviting a striving toward an aim: a transformation of mind. Taken together, they are everything: remembrance and hope.

And it's true, that how we tend to hear it has something to do with the whole project of repentance. To repent, which is to say to return to some prior and enduring truth or home, while also striving toward an expansion of mind that our understanding might resemble God's knowing and understanding, does involve some admission of guilt, some awareness of failure or corruption or falling short. But that's hardly central to the project. Really, it's more of a by-product of it—for to transform your mind so you know what God knows is also to know where your thinking has fallen short or your mind has been small or closed, to know as God knows is then to know what of you is not of God or not like God. Truly, to expose yourself to the glory of God, to return to God in all God's beauty and goodness, is to risk the revealing of your own imperfection, to risk laying bare your own need for refining as by fire or fulling as by harsh soap.

I never feel uglier than when I find myself standing next to a most beautiful woman.

I never feel weaker and more unprepared as a rower than when I need to take a 20-minute erg test.

I've never felt dumber than when trying to learn math from my brilliant math teacher, Mr. Paris, who realized with such heart that I had no hope of ever learning this material.

Coming close to any standard of excellence brings the risk of having revealed your own lack of excellence, while never to come near to such an enduring standard is never to realize how you don't measure up. And that has its appeal, right? I don't actually *need* to row in a race against Olympians, and I don't actually *need* to register for that next level of math. (As for beautiful women. Fine. Fine. Whatever.) I can save myself that humiliation, at least.

An anecdote remembers someone in crisis, everything in her life one screw up after another. A friend recommended she come to church. Her response: "Why would I do that? I feel bad enough about myself as it is."

And it could be every time that woman tried church she ended up in a place where the preaching and practice were all about shame, if though claimed to be in a spirit of love. If this was the case, then shame on those churches. It could also be that the simple experience of sitting close amidst God who is perfect love was entirely too much for her. Sometimes tender kindness cuts to the quick.

Repentance can be that: a tenderness that comes close to where we live, like when in *The Shawshank Redemption* the music of Mozart calls out across the prison yard and it's just too beautiful for such a fallen place. You'd almost rather something ugly, something violent. That would make you cry a lot less.

When you're treated to something beautiful, something lovely and kind, when you know what you deserve is something rough and ugly, it almost hurts more.

It also might begin the healing, might be a first step in recovery, toward perfection, toward salvation.

This world isn't ready for what's coming to it. You're not ready for what you've got coming. Love. Tender new life. A fresh beginning amidst this tired old turning.

But it's really coming as it did really come, arriving amidst this world of empires and grinding economies, of powerful exploitation and hopeless situations and stunted relations, more of the same.

Ready or not.

Thanks be to God.