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Advent 2 Series C 2018

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Second Sunday of Advent – December 9

Last week we joked that the modern celebration of Advent should rename the candles. This would be the Amazon or the Target candle I think this week. If our worship really reflected the age, we would hand out a coupon for some great deal at a big box store. But of course something sounds wrong about that. We are not *homo emptor* (buying man) but watching the bedlam which is Black Friday from the comfort of my living room, I am hard pressed to say that we are *homo sapiens* (wise/thinking man) either. Having spent the day in proper thanksgiving for all the blessings we have, we turn around on Black Friday and get into a fist fight with someone over cheap underwear. (Observation shared by 12 year old catechumen in Keene, NH)

I have extended the first two readings (Malachi and Psalm) just a little bit because both of them move immediately from the discussion of devotion and faith placed in God to matters economic. Malachi's audience are bringing the blind and lame lambs for an offering. It is a little like the family that brought dad's worn out photo-copier to my father's parish as a gift after he died. It was the days of stencils and mimeographs, a messy and time-consuming way to make a Sunday bulletin. A copier was a bit of a luxury then but after the funeral my father could not ask the council for one, he had one. It just did not work regularly. I suppose it would not have been so galling if they had not also made multi-thousand dollar public gifts to local institutions from his estate as well. The church (God?) got the worn out photo-copier.

But this is way of things with us as well. We can go to great lengths to make sure that our homes are appointed with the latest and greatest, but the Church can make do with worn out carpeting, poor plumbing, and that leaky window which you would never allow in your own home.

John comes to convict us today of a heart that is in serious need of renovation, a complete replacement actually. This no fresh coat of paint he is talking about. The hearer wonders if he/she is numbered among the brood of vipers. The axe is laid to the root of the tree, the fire of judgment has been lit, and the day grows near. It is not a Sunday for the timid preacher.

Since the Watergate scandal of the 1970's, the mantra has become "follow the money." I am proposing that the preacher who wants to speak the strong words of God's judgment which will in turn be followed by the strong words of God's grace, may just want to follow the money. Yes, of course, God is happy that we spend our money in fulfilling our vocation as parents, spouses, neighbors, etc. But does that really explain, justify, or excuse our spending priorities? Do I really need the larger flat screen TV I bought at black Friday sale? How about the upgraded automobile, the designer kitchen, the 27th pair of shoes in the closet, or the artisanal organic veggies I bought the other day at the high end grocery store? In and of themselves, none of these things are wrong. But what do they say about me and my relationship with God?

Collect of the Day

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Last week we wanted God to stir up his power, we will speak the same prayer for God's power to be stirred on the last Sunday of Advent. But this week we want him to stir our hearts. But when our hearts are stirred up that is not usually a good thing, is it? The image of having your heart stirred up could be a description of falling in love, I suppose, but most of the time when we are stirred up it means we are angry, upset, afraid, or some other negative sort of emotion.

But we want God to stir up our hearts. What exactly does that mean? Shall we become afraid of our sins and their consequences? Repentance? Does this mean we are no longer complacent about sin? Does God's stirring action break up my comfortable acceptance of sin in my life? Shall we grow angry at the injustice of the world and the cruelty of death and pain and suffering? Shall we be upset with the status quo and long for the righteousness of God to be revealed? Surely that is a good way to have one's heart stirred up. But does it result in the outcome which the prayer seeks? Or is this the stirring of love? Is enthusiasm another way to look at "stirred up heart?" Is our predilection to seeing this as a negative simply a result of the fall and not something essential to a stirred up heart?

We get our hearts stirred up when we get a letter from the IRS and we wonder if this means we will be audited. When the company is failing and the managers all are summoned to a meeting with the human resources type, the employees hearts are stirred up as they wonder who will get the axe. A stirred up heart is a tough thing.

Perhaps the stirring is just unsettling a heart that has grown complacent. If you want to stir up a house, just have a baby born there. Bring a new little person into a house and it is stirred up. We are getting ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus, a babe laid in a manger. If our hearts are not stirred up by this, is that a good thing? Isn't it good for young parents to be stirred up at the birth of a child? Of course it is. Jesus certainly stirred up Mary and Joseph's life. Consider Mary's questions to Gabriel or Joseph's dream. They were stirred up people, their hearts were not calm in the days leading up to Jesus' birth.

How is a stirred up heart more ready for Jesus? A stirred up heart is usually a time when we are ready to act, our senses are keener. We are ready to fight or flee, ready to do something, accomplish a task, either good or bad. If our heart is stirred up, the whole body and mind are in motion and ready to move.

This suggests that the status quo is an impediment to the coming of Christ. What impedes Christ in our quiet hearts? Is it our complacency with sin? Is it our willingness to tolerate evil, put up with sin? Do we too easily just shrug our shoulders and say "That's just the way it is."? Do we need a little more righteous indignation, some genuine rage at the situation, some passionate response to evil? Those seem like dangerous things to ask for in this age of outrage.

Perhaps we need to look at this whole stirring metaphor. We stir in our kitchens, is that the sort of stirring that we see here? We stir up a batch of ingredients to make something new and different. Does God stir up the old sinner and see what comes out of the pan? When I am in the

kitchen, I am in control of this. God is the chef here, not me, as an ingredient, this is still a terrifying thing. But the metaphor of cooking might make a fun preaching moment.

The prayer wants God to stir up our hearts so we may make ready the way of Jesus and that then results in us being able to serve God with a pure mind. Our ultimate goal is to serve God with a pure mind. To do that we need Jesus to come, and the stirring up of our hearts is making the way ready for Jesus to come. This is getting complicated.

Our hearts are stirred up to make ready for Jesus. It would seem most likely that means we are to repent, renounce this sins of this world, embrace the purity of God and his heaven, and to do what is good and right. This has been a powerful motivator, often raising up Christians and movements which have been disruptive and unruly. The Franciscans of the 13th century, Luther in the 16th century, and others have sought to embrace the purity of God practice a true repentance. Our worldly and sinfully inclined hearts will have to be stirred up for that to happen and those historical figures might make a really good resource for the preacher today.

Of their own accord, we rather like things the way they are; or even if we don't like things as they are, we are really afraid of what might come if we upset the apple cart. People who study change in congregations tell us that every meaningful change starts with a most useful person, a catalyst, who upsets the status quo. This person points out the problem, brings it to the surface of everyone's understanding. It is not a fun job and often such people are not well liked. They tend to make enemies.

It is interesting to me that the preparation for the coming of Christ is located in the heart and not the deeds. We often get this confused. Jesus, upon his return, is not judging the number of good deeds or the bad deeds. He comes to judge the heart. The deeds are merely indicators of the heart. The heart stirred up to prepare for his coming may in fact be weeping tears of repentance, but may also be handing out coats to homeless people down at the local shelter. It might be teaching a child to read or in the melee of politics striving for real solutions to today's real problem. Do the various categories of the Beatitudes describe a stirred up heart?

What is the coming of Christ? Is that an end of the world sort of thing, or is that a right now thing? The participle is ambiguous about that, it doesn't actually have a tense associated with it, but suggests an ongoing sort of thing. Jesus is coming? It is a little like the discussion of the petition in the Lord's Prayer which says "Thy Kingdom come." Just what does that mean? Where does Jesus come, when, how? Is it sacramental, is it eschatological? What is the coming of kingdom? What is the coming of Jesus? Your answer to those questions will probably dictate your sermon's thrust this week.

What then does it mean to serve God with a pure mind? A mind freed from sin seems so far from us today, even though we don't often focus on the reality of thought-sins. Is the pure mind a mind cleansed from these things? Yes, but it also is a mind which is not focused on them, cowed by the sins which are still clinging to us, but rather trusts that such things are in Christ's capable hands.

Readings

Malachi 3:1-7b

¹ “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² 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. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

⁵ “Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

⁶ “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. ⁷ From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. *But you say, ‘How shall we return?’* ⁸ *Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions.* ⁹ *You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you.* ¹⁰ *Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.* ¹¹ *I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts.* ¹² *Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.*

The Jewish Scriptures often go by the acronym “TaNaK.” This stands for Torah, Nebiim (prophets), and Kethubim (writings). This the order of the OT in Jewish bibles. This means the last book of the Jewish bible is II Chronicles which ends with the focus on the worshiping community. The Christians adopted the ordering found in the Septuagint and that means we end with the writing prophets, and especially Malachi with his strong focus on the coming Messiah.

Malachi means “My Messenger” and some have thought that the name of the book actually refers to this passage and not to the prophet himself. Even if this is the prophet’s name, he is surely punning off it as he writes this section.

The Christians have long read this and heard the name John the Baptist immediately surface. There is good reason for that. In chapter 4, Malachi identifies this messenger with Elijah returned, and Jesus himself labels the Baptizer Elijah returned. The gospel writers, but not Luke, will quote this passage in their description of John the Baptist.

Malachi writes in the period after the rebuilding of the second temple, after the people have come back from Exile and are once more in the land. The temple has been rebuilt, but Malachi notices as certain deadness of heart among the people of God. They don't seem to act as if they really believe in the LORD. He upbraids them for their shoddy worship, their willingness to bring the lame and the blind sheep for a sacrifice and not the best lambs of their flock. He chastises them for being focused on their own needs first and then the needs of God and his house. They live in paneled houses but the church of God is falling apart he laments in chapter 2. (Have you noticed the state of the carpet in most churches? Who among our parishioners would tolerate that in their own home?)

Malachi also made very effective use of a question and answer format. He asks a question and then answers it. It is sort of like reading the Catechism in that regard. The last part of the last verse of this pericope is actually the start of one of those sections of questions and answers, but the editors of the pericope have chopped it off.

In this reading Malachi addressed the expectations of the people of his day. They all longed for the Lord to intervene in the world, or at least they said so. The return from exile had been so mundane. They heard the stories of Moses and the prophets like Elijah and Elisha and the yearned for God to come so that they too could believe. Malachi tells them that it is a fearsome thing to have God show up. His a refining fire and strong fullers soap, the sort of a cleanser that is made from strong lye, caustic stuff which gets clothes really white. Our equivalent is not soap but bleach. It is not pleasant. They say they long for God to come, then they will believe, but Malachi reminds them that to believe is something they must do now or at the coming of God they may find themselves on the wrong side of God.

He identifies three areas within his book and this reading which are critical. First of all he criticizes their worship. The people are bringing offerings, they are going through the motions of the temple, but it is not right. God will purify the Levites and then the worship of Israel will be pleasing to God. We have often thought that the folks who skip church have a reason to repent, but Malachi upbraids the folks who are going for what they are doing at church. Just showing up is perhaps half the battle, but if we are content with that, we are only half way there. The real battle is for the hearts of the worshiper. The Levites, the leaders within the communities, they are the place to start. Do we preachers need to repent? Of what would we admit that we need to repent? Is our worship without heart or passion? Does this Advent season give us occasion to think about what happens with the folks who are there on Sundays?

The next area addresses the people clearly outside the fold, the idolatrous sorcerers and adulterers. The sorcery charge might perhaps be more akin to what we would simply call superstitious, they consulted a horoscope or made decisions based upon some sort of omen. They are looking outside of God for assurance and help. This may seem like a distant problem, but ask most of our parishioners whence cometh their help and you might be surprised at the answers which come out of their mouths. Who informs their decisions on what to eat, what to do, how to

act, and whom to marry? You may find names like Dr. Phil (not me, the other one), my banker, my investment advisor, etc.

The last set of issues is more of a listing of the Ten Commandments. Like the prophets of the years before the exile, Malachi sees the moral corruption of his day and sees not a moral issue but a relationship issue. The problem with sins is not the sins themselves but the truth that they reflect a broken relationship between the sinner and God. They thrust aside the sojourner and mistreat the poor and the widow "because they do not fear me." The real problem is not what they are doing; although, that is bad enough, the real problem is whom they trust. The failed relationship bears wicked fruit.

This is a dire message today, but it ends on a much more hopeful message. Because of God's nature they are not destroyed. By rights they ought to be burned up, but they are not. That is God's nature coming to the fore. They have long been turning aside, they are no different than the people of old. They think God has changed, but it is really they who have not changed. God has stayed the same, faithful and true to his promise. The problem is that they have not really changed from the idolatrous and rebellious children of Israel who grumbled for the forty years in the wilderness and who quickly became enmeshed in Baal worship after they came to the Promised Land. They thought they were different; they were no longer the superstitious medieval Catholics, but now they were properly informed and believing Lutherans.

Are we any different today? From that last sentence you can probably surmise that I hardly think so. The preacher will want to draw out those similarities. We are not being punished by the persecuting state for attending church, so we don't go. We come to worship and it is often an occasion to fight or we see it as a duty which we must do instead of what God sees when he comes to meet us here, the joyous opportunity to forgive your sins. Our prayers are listless, our singing is perfunctory, and our offerings are begrudgingly given. We turn to everyone but him for help. Our prayer life languishes and our lives bear wicked fruit because we have a sick relationship with God. Our sins may not register on the irrelevant scale of human estimation as large. But in God's eyes the stinginess and small-heartedness of our lives is no different than the widow abusing, oppressive lives of the slum lords of Dickens or ancient Israel. They sold a person for the price of a pair of shoes, do we do any better when we buy our Chinese made shoes made in a dismal factory by some rural peasant recently come to Shanghai? His life is seriously shortened by the working conditions there. Have we not sold a man's life so our running shoes can be the right brand and relatively cheap?

The preacher will likely want to rely on the final part of the reading. There God declares that he does not change. That is strong Law, but also beautiful Gospel. The Jesus who loved the sinners of his day loves us as well. The gospel is found in the unchanging patience, love, and kindness of God. His people have always rebelled and they are not destroyed. God has not changed. He is still the faithful keeper of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Psalm 66:1-12

- ¹ Shout for joy to God, all the earth;
² sing the glory of his name;
give to him glorious praise!
- ³ Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds!
So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you.
- ⁴ All the earth worships you
and sings praises to you;
they sing praises to your name.” Selah
- ⁵ Come and see what God has done:
he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man.
- ⁶ He turned the sea into dry land;
they passed through the river on foot.
There did we rejoice in him,
- ⁷ who rules by his might forever,
whose eyes keep watch on the nations—
let not the rebellious exalt themselves. Selah
- ⁸ Bless our God, O peoples;
let the sound of his praise be heard,
- ⁹ who has kept our soul among the living
and has not let our feet slip.
- ¹⁰ For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.
- ¹¹ You brought us into the net;
you laid a crushing burden on our backs;
- ¹² you let men ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.
- ¹³ *I will come into your house with burnt offerings;
I will perform my vows to you,*
- ¹⁴ *that which my lips uttered
and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.*
- ¹⁵ *I will offer to you burnt offerings of fattened animals,
with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;
I will make an offering of bulls and goats.*

This psalm really speaks of the antidote to Malachi’s dilemma with his people. It does not lie in us somehow fixing our hearts or adjusting our attitudes, the real solution lies with God. The Psalmist exhorts the hearer to see what God has done, the mighty and loving works of God. The

worship here is not listless and perfunctory, but full of life and passion. What makes it so? Is it not God himself?

I have extended this reading because I thought it interesting that like Malachi it extends right into a worship/sacrifice motif. These are expensive things he will do. This is a considerable expense on his part. This is the worship of a man/woman who has been given all and in turn gives all.

Philippians 1:2-11

¹ *Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,*

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:

² *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

³ *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

The Epistle is something of a relief sandwiched between these other texts. Paul writes in joy and peace. He is admittedly in prison, but he writes in joy. They have sent help to him and this is really the thank you letter he sends back to them with the young man who brought the help.

I think the preacher will want to focus on verses 6, 9-11 here. Verse six is a critical verse and worthy of a whole sermon to itself. It does much to explain our lives as we live them. We are a work in progress, but a work of Christ not of ourselves. God has begun the work on the day of our baptism, and God will bring it to completion on the day of Christ.

But this is not to suggest that we are somehow passive and non-participatory in this. Paul's prayer for the Philippians could be spoken of all of us. He wants their love to abound more and more with knowledge and discernment. This results in their approval of what is excellent and this then makes them pure and blameless on the day of Christ. He prays that we be filled with righteousness that comes through Christ to the praise and glory of God.

This is not easy work. To approve of what is excellent requires a great deal of discernment and often is a process beset with mistakes. Remember this is a work in progress, I am not there yet. As NT Wright tells his classes every term, "Some of the things I tell you this term are wrong. The

problem is I don't exactly know which bits are wrong and which ones are right." This is the struggle. Some would advocate that we only approve of "LCMS" branded things. That certainly makes life easier, but does it really bring us closer to that excellence which results in purity and blamelessness in the day of Christ? Of course there are those whose self-loathing and Synod hatred mean that they automatically reject anything which comes from CPH or LCMS. That is not particularly helpful either. And this is just one plane of this approval process. This occupies a whole range of places within the human being and his/her existence.

This is decidedly not easy.

Luke 3:1-14 (15-20)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall become straight,

and the rough places shall become level ways,

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

⁷ He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³ And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but

he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

It is most likely that our attention will be drawn to this reading and its portrayal of John the Baptist. And this is good. John prepares us for Jesus, both to celebrate his birth and to welcome him on that great and terrible day which Malachi seems to have seen.

What is the difference between our calling as preachers and the vocation of John the Baptist? We do not begin many of our services by calling the folks a brood of vipers. One also gets the sense that John ended every conversation with “eternal, unquenchable fire!” Of course, he also got his head chopped off.

- 1. John prepares for Jesus to come, we proclaim that Jesus has come.*
- 2. John called people to repent – we call people to remember.*
- 3. The proclamation of John pointed out sins and shortcomings of the people. We proclaim the one met and forgive our sins and shortcomings.*

This said, these distinctions are surely too stark. Any preacher of the Gospel should also proclaim the Law of God. But the biggest difference for me is that while John spoke of a life reformed in preparation for Christ’s arrival, our call to reform life is a life reformed by the presence of Christ. This is the difference of Pentecost. Jesus has come with fire and Spirit, but it was not the fire of judgment to consume us, but it was the fire of the Spirit to resurrect us to newness of life. The reform we proclaim is not our change in order to please God, but we proclaim the change that comes because God has taken up residence in sinful humanity and is working his kingdom in the lives of real people.

To that end Luke starts off with a list of rulers and reigns. This is the way that ancients kept track of time. The system of AD and BC by which we number our years was not invented for another several hundred years.

But there is more than that going on here. This is the second list in Luke like this, the first one being in the familiar birth narrative in chapter 2. Luke could be said to be class conscious, or at least he is aware of these things and wants to make a point of them. The order of these guys and the names on the list are both important. He could have done the dating thing with a simple reference to any one of these men. But by listing them in this order, starting with the Emperor and down through the various levels of government, he really establishes a world hierarchy in the mind of the reader. He will contrast this with both John and then with Jesus, who will come

from humble beginnings and will be outside this system. You might wonder if he is not setting up a target for John and Jesus to hit. Or you might wonder if he is positing that John and Jesus are establishing a competing kingdom.

The inclusion of the high priests within this list is also significant. It puts them squarely in the worldly power category. They belong in that list, a group which will be pitted against Jesus in many respects. But this is more than just a list of the enemies of Jesus and his people, but also a definition of the scope of Jesus ministry. He came for the entire world. He came for the whole empire, for the whole people of God, the whole creation. The Judaism which has long thought itself as the totality of God's kingdom will need to re-orient itself. Jesus will assert another kingdom, a whole other realm over which he is king. Luke sees the Kingdom of God in both a parallel but also a competition with this kingdom of the world. He takes great pains to show that the Romans don't have anything to fear from the Christians; yet, he also stresses that the Kingdom of God transcends and ultimately is the real allegiance of the Christians.

"The Word of God came to John..." This is the classic formula for introducing the words of an OT prophet. The Word of the Lord was what came to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Amos, and Micah and the rest of the prophetic strand. John is one of them.

But what is this "Word of God." John the Apostle and Evangelist very clearly wants us to understand that this was Jesus. Was the coming of the Word of the Lord to John the Baptist simply a visit from his cousin Jesus? Did the pre-ministry Jesus find him out in the wilderness, perhaps hanging around with the Essene community whose writings we know from the Dead Sea scrolls? Luke doesn't tell us this, he wants us to see that John is one of the OT prophets, but it is an intriguing idea. What would it look like to have the "Word of the Lord" come to someone? Jeremiah seems to get into arguments with the Word, which suggests that it was a personal thing. He could disagree, resist, grow angry with, and be disappointed by the Word of the Lord. Was that the gentle pre-incarnate Christ who came to Jeremiah, Isaiah and the rest of the prophetic band? Jeremiah actively resisted the Word, but found that when he did so his bones burned and his mind was tormented until he spoke the burden of his prophecy.

John ends up in the desert regions just north of the Dead Sea. It is a terrible and desolate place, which looks a lot like the salt flats of Utah or some of the most barren landscapes in North America. What is he doing out there? It is not as odd as it sounds. The people of Galilee were separated from the temple and the region of Judea by a small province called "Samaria" and it was the home of the hated Samaritans. To speak with a Samaritan or to touch one rendered a pious Jew unclean and forced a week long cleansing ritual. To avoid this, the Jews would not traverse Samaritan lands, they would cross the Jordan just south of the Sea of Galilee, go down the valley on the other side from the Samaritans, and re-cross the Jordan just north of the Dead Sea, thus avoiding the Samaritans. In order to get an idea of the Jewish treatment of the Samaritans, I suggest you read the account Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4 and take note of how the disciples act. This is also why Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan has a priest and levite ascending to Jerusalem from Jericho. They were going around Samaritan territory.

The result was that Bethany, on the other side of the Jordan, was a Jewish highway. What's more the folks who went out there would have been the most religious, pious of the Jews. John essentially grabbed some premium advertising real estate and set up shop. He had a constant stream of religiously minded folks walking by and he started preaching to them. It was apparently quite successful. He probably positioned himself at the fording spot of the Jordan River and started preaching.

John's message was one of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He baptized and this is what makes him unusual. He baptized Jews. This practice is likely what brought the critical attention of the Jewish leaders to his ministry. This was novel. The gentiles who came to the Jewish faith were regularly baptized at the time, but not people who were already Jewish. The only other folks we know of who were undergoing ritual washings of this type among the Jews were the Essene communities, which were also in the wilderness near the Dead Sea. This, along with some verbal allusions in John's preaching, have lead some to wonder if John was not a member of that community. We don't know.

John's message is especially sharp. Why does John preach this sharp law to people who are ostensibly coming out to hear him, which would imply some repentance? Are the crowds just slowing down to hear a preacher beside the road? Have they not really come out to hear him? Do they rely upon their descent from Abraham to save them? Do we preach that God can raise up children for Luther from these stones?! No one gets into heaven because he is the child of a Lutheran. Do we think we have folks who are coming into church this Sunday with this sort of an attitude? Do they need to be called a brood of vipers?

Luke has tied the ministry of John directly to Isaiah, but interestingly, he extends the Isaiah prophecy past the words which Mark and Matthew quote. He takes it to the verse in which "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." That is significant for the themes of Luke who is really an advocate of understanding that Jesus came for the whole world. They will all experience the salvation of God, the straightening of the crooked and the filling in of the low and the lowering of the high.

His sermon is pretty spectacular. "You brood of vipers..." is probably not the best way to start a sermon this Sunday. But you have to admit he is effective. Matthew tells us this bile was reserved for the religious leaders. Luke has it more generally given. They cannot rely on status conferred by birth. Just because they are children of Abraham does not cut much with God. His judgment is not of deeds but of the heart, the heart produces the deeds of repentance.

When John gets to talking with the folks who come to him, it is interesting that he never tells anyone to quit their job. Everyone is exhorted to be generous and to share with one another. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of the heart. The tax collectors are exhorted to collect the fair amount. They are not told to quit. The soldiers are simply told to do their job without extorting more than what is due from someone or abusing their power. They should simply be content with what they have received.

The option part of the reading reinforces this but adds another element. John is not the Messiah. Luke probably had to include this element because there were people in the first century who thought that John the Baptist was the Messiah. We run into a few of them. Paul encounters some in his missionary journeys including his later assistant and co-worker Apollos. (Acts 18-19). John describes the one who comes after him as having a winnowing fork in hand and who will act with fire. Of course, that is either all bad news or all good news. Is the promised fire the destructive fire of hellish judgment or is that fire the Holy Spirit? Of course Luke sees Pentecost in this, but do we really understand the Spirit burning up our chaff with unquenchable fire? Luke ends this story of John with his unjust arrest at the hands of Herod.

Law

1. My heart is out of step with God. It is content with the sin and disturbed by the good. When I see a good man I reflect on my own sinfulness, or more likely I look for his flaw so I can assuage my conscience a little that at least I am not alone in my flaws. When I see evil, I yawn or turn away. I am not repulsed or moved to action to do something about it. My heart is out of step with God.
2. My out of step heart bears wicked fruit in my life. I am much more concerned about the price of Christmas presents I have to buy than I am about the people who made them or the young girl who takes my money at the check-out line. I am willing to go to great lengths to get a bargain, but I won't step out of my way to help a starving man. What sort of a human being am I?
3. Power in my hands becomes an occasion not to help another but to help myself. I make sure that my retirement is secure before I look to the needs of another. No one will take care of me but me, so I had better get busy with the self-service.
4. Even something as holy and good as worship is tainted by this broken heart. I can sit in the presence of angels and archangels, worship with saints and hear the very gospel of Christ and complain about the organ music being too fast or too slow, too loud or the wrong hymn. I can critique the preacher or the parishioner and miss the point that God has forgiven them both in the very words we have spoken. Worship is the one part of my life which ought of be worthy of heaven, but my foul heart has tainted even my songs of praise.
5. Now I look at the tragedies of my life and can see only the punishment I deserve. With David I must confess that I am sinful from my birth, in my innermost place God has searched me and found me lacking.

Gospel

1. God has not changed his nature since the day he sought my first father in a garden long ago. The Lord who seeks out his rebellious and sinful people is still seeking, desiring, and patiently forgiving them. He knows the rottenness of my heart and loves me nonetheless.
2. And thus he has begun a good work in me, he has stirred up my heart, he has awoken within me a conscience which plagues my old sinner and softened a heart which looks upon the suffering of my fellow human being with compassion and empathy. It is not perfect, but it is there, it is growing, God is working.
3. He has achieved such a thing through his own suffering so that now when I am confronted by the suffering and need of another, I am empowered to act. My salvation was wrought by Christ on a cross and this means that I see my fellow human being through new eyes. Suffering, either that of another man or my own suffering, is completely different. Paul rejoices and exhorts joy from his prison cell.
4. And the transformative work extends even to those parts of my life which don't seem to be in need of such transformation. My worship is worthy of heaven, but not because I have gotten it right, but because he has. He has purified the Levites, even this one. The hands which I raise in prayer, or by which I extend the Eucharist are pure and holy for this task by his gracious work. The lips which sing his praises and the songs which I sing are blended with angelic worship and joyfully received by God.
5. God has created a clean heart within me and restored a right spirit. With Psalmist I can see that God has indeed laid heavy burdens upon my back, my sins have brought terrible things upon my head, but God means them to be for my healing and my restoration. From such afflictions he now preserves my life and leads me to a place of abundance. I have seen the mighty works of God as he has redeemed this sinner and it has opened my mouth to praise Him.

Sermon Ideas

1. He will bring his good work to completion on the day of Christ (Epistle – That the Spirit of God would open the eyes of the hearer to perceive His work in life and eagerly expect and engage in that good work.)

Let's face it, I need a lot of work to be ready for heaven. An eternity on the trajectory in which I usually find myself is not a definition of heaven but hell itself. My life too often is littered with broken promises, relationships, and unfinished good deeds. An eternity of this would not be a good thing. Before the first 10,000 years had passed I would have pretty much isolated myself from every other human being who ever lived. Perhaps Jesus would come and visit me in my cave somewhere, but that would be about it.

But heaven is not like that. I will be radically and utterly transformed on that day of Jesus Christ's appearance at the end of time. I will belong in heaven. I won't be the same sinful, crotchety, difficult person I am now. Every relationship will be durable, loving,

and beautiful in every way. Not only will my body be perfect, but my heart, will, and mind shall be completely transformed by God's gracious work. I firmly believe that if we are even able to notice these changes, the greatest changes we will perceive will be the changes inside our own hearts and minds on that last day. The eternal bodies, the perfect world, the whole rest of it will pale in comparison to the profound changes that God will work inside me.

But that work is not just an end of the world sort of thing; although, it will not be completed until that last day. God is at work right now and this is the real message of this text. God is doing good things to me right now. He is causing us to abound in love, he is given us to bear the fruits of righteousness, he is opening our minds and hearts to discern and understand in ways which we would never have done prior to baptism, the day he started this good work in us.

Consider the things for which Paul prays in the lives of the Philippians and you will have a good idea of what it is that God is working in us right now.

- a. He prays for love to abound more and more. Love grows as Jesus takes up residence and works in our midst.
- b. He prays for discernment so that they can recognize the good/excellent things and presumably what is the not-so-good and less than excellent.
- c. He prays that they be holy and pure on the day of Christ. All this is done by Jesus to the glory of God in the name of Jesus. It is not for us to claim nor is it a burden laid upon us. This is God's doing.

This sermon will want to keep its gaze firmly on the end product, the not-yet of Advent expectations, but it will guide those expectations by looking at this life this day. Jesus does not just leave us to wallow in our filth until he resurrects the pig as a man or woman on the last day. He starts his transformative work now. This is a time to point to the acts of charity and good which the congregation is doing and expect Jesus to do more. This is a time to point to the healthy and good things that are happening in your midst and look for Jesus to do more. This is the time to look for the wise decisions made, the healthy choices, and the lives renewed/changed by the Gospel and expect Jesus to do more of that sort of thing in your life.

We have not yet arrived, but we are on the way. Our assurance is in the promise of God, not by looking at ourselves, but the look at life can also bring a message that God is at work among us and He is! The tempter wants to distract us from this good vision. He works very hard to get us to focus on the dismal and problem. He cannot bear the thought that would be excited about Jesus at work in us. He would suck that joy out of us.

Our culture will want to put the burden on us. The Gospel in this sermon is that Jesus is the one who has shouldered this responsibility. He is the one who makes us pure. He is

the love that abounds within us. He is the wisdom of God which enables the discernment. We cannot be those things. We can cling to apathy and hatred. We can cling to the old and dark ways of this world. We can cling to our sin. We cannot bring about the good.

So, he takes an axe to our roots. The OT and Gospel readings speak of what God is doing to that old man. This is the good work too. He is slaying that old stinker. He is drowning him in baptism, casting him into the fires of hell, so that from that death he can raise up a new person, the good work that he is still working and will continue to work in us.

2. Prepare the Way of the Lord (That the hearer would seriously and earnestly examine his/her self in the joyful anticipation of Christ's "coming" into this life.)

This sermon will try to invoke the strong words of Malachi and John to the people of that day. The successful preacher of this sermon works toward people who are willing to undergo the painful diagnosis of sin that the healing medicine of Christ may be applied.

Christmas without penitence and this sort of reflection cannot but be a crass sort of commercialism. We all decry the fact that Jesus seems to be displaced from the Christmas season. What is the Starbucks Christmas Cup controversy this year? But do we really want Christ in Christmas? We say we do, but do we really want him there? Do Christians really want this Jesus to show up? Do they not simply make him irrelevant another way, confining him to a manger and keeping him at a safe distance that way? Even the good things of our life, loving our family, celebrating together can keep Christ at a distance. The one who lies in that manger is the very judge of heaven and earth. He comes to render judgment of human hearts, what if he takes a good hard look at mine? What will he find there? Surely I have much of which I need to repent. The preacher needs to do this carefully. This sort of a Law presentation should be pointed but still able to gather as many into the nets as possible. Here are just a few ideas, perhaps you can find some more.

- a. My trust is not squarely in God, but often I find my heart upset when finances and politics and other things seem to go awry. Why do I worry about these things? I belong to God. But that is easier said than done.
- b. My actions belie a sick heart. I am far more likely to spend a great deal on a Christmas celebration, restaurant or vacation than I am on the sick, poor, suffering fellow human beings who live in my own community.
- c. I am in the shopping season, what drives my purchasing decisions. Do I ask whether the man or woman who made this sweater or this pair of shoes was treated fairly in the factory where they worked? Do I even care? Do I only look for the cheapest and best sale because my God is really in my wallet and he looks like Lincoln, Washington, and Grant?

- d. When power comes into my hands at work, at home, at school, or anywhere, how do I use it? Do I make sure that I and my circle are always cared for first?
- e. Do I hate the joy of another and secretly delight in the suffering and grief of another? I may not be some sadist, but I can note with satisfaction the dent in my neighbor's new car that I cannot afford or rob him of his joy by pointing out the flaw in his new television.
- f. I can put the lights on my house, I can decorate my lawn, I can attend the parties and the festivities, but does anyone of my neighbors or co-workers really know that my celebration is for the birth of my Savior? Am I an anonymous Christian in this sense? Is there enough evidence of my faith that a person who runs into me outside of these four walls would be able to tell that I am a follower of Jesus? I am not talking about whether we wear a cross around our necks, but whether we wear a cross in our deeds. Do they ever see a miraculous, humble servant heart in us?
- g. Even my family Christmas can be devoid of Him, or at least not focused upon him. It might actually distract me. Malachi decried the worship of Israel – even when they were in church they found a way to bring their brokenness into the picture. Just because we go to church on Christmas Eve does not mean we get this right. Do we find ourselves looking at our watches that night looking forward more to the “fun stuff” which comes after the family tradition of worship?

The Lord Jesus has begun a good work in us and is bringing it to completion on His day. God is not deceived into thinking that we are good, rather he is quite aware of all this, but has sent Jesus into this world bearing Holy Spirit fire to purify and make us whole again. He awakens within us the very conscience which notices the things we have talked about. This is a good, albeit painful thing. We dare not suppress it, for it is the very work of Christ. I do not know exactly where it will lead you, except to say that it ends up in his loving arms. I know a woman who made the mistake of crossing the Mexico border and whose eyes Christ has opened up to see the suffering there. Her next trip south she filled the trunk of her car with worthless junk she was about to throw away and stopped in a little mountain village in Mexico and simply opened her trunk and gave it away. The last time I heard about her she was taking vanloads of donated items to some of poorest communities in Mexico. One doesn't know where such a thing will lead, but it always ends up in His arms.

Christ is at work in us today as well. He knows what obstacles of selfishness, greed, sloth, pride, and other mortal sins are latent in your heart. But that is simply the reason his solution had to be so radical. He poured out his life blood for those things so that today he can be about the business of renovating your heart. He beats down the mountains of pride, he lifts up the lowest depravity, he smoothes the coarse and rough places.

3. All Flesh Shall See the Salvation of the Lord – even this flesh, even this sinner. (That the hearer would, trusting that Jesus’ love and forgiveness is even for him/her, invite a friend to Christmas Eve services, maybe a tax collector or a soldier or ...?)

God has made a child for Abraham even out of the gentile rock that is my heart.

We sit in our churches this Advent season, perhaps in a humble awareness, perhaps in the smug awareness that we are here and the hoards of greedy fools who fill the malls this morning are missing out on the real joy of Christmas. We also know that they will show up in a few weeks on Christmas Eve, and their fumbling attempts to navigate worship folders and hymnals will betray to us that they are not here regularly. John the Baptist really socks it to them today, doesn’t he?

But wait a minute, John today speaks to the people of God. We are the brood of vipers, we are the wicked generation. John’s audience are not the irreligious of his day, but he addresses the very people who are the pious ones, they are the folks who are in church every Sabbath, who are right now avoiding the unclean Samaritans by crossing the Jordan and taking the long way around to the Temple. This message of repent and make straight the path of God belongs to us, not only to some imagined “them.” In our OT reading, the prophet Malachi reminds us that our cold worship which the unchurched and dechurched folks of our day find so hypocritical and our frigid passionless service is what has driven them away from these doors.

This season gives us an opportunity. Whether it is because Grandma makes them, whether it is because some almost forgotten childhood memory prompts them, or whether it is because they too have finally seen the emptiness of a Christ-less Christmas, millions of folks will stumble through church doors this Christmas Eve for perhaps the only time this year. They are all looking for a Savior on the one night of the year they are sure to find him here. Here you might develop some of the ideas which are discussed in the first sermon. We are the very people to whom John spoke.

My dad used to have a guy who always said to him on the way out of church, “I hope they were listening, Pastor.” Do we do that? Do we expect others to listen but don’t think this applies to us? Maybe that is what the crowds came to hear that day when they arrived at John’s wilderness chapel. Were they hoping he would really let “them” have it with both barrels so they could watch the other guy squirm? Were they surprised when John took aim at them?

John was the last of a long line of OT prophets who proclaimed God’s steadfast love for a rebellious people. That God has not changed his nature today. He is still the same patient and loving God he has always been and our lives and our church, and our witness all tests his patience. The repentance which this world ought to undergo starts with this community and the very Christians who sit in churches today while they shop. John is very clear that he is not the solution to the problem. He points them to Jesus, the same

Jesus we point people toward today, the same Jesus who speaks through our absolution, who comes to us in this supper, who is with us even now.

But it does not end there. Christ has begun a good work in us and brings it to completion. The fullness of his joy and the fervent desire of his heart is that all men and women be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. We are about to have a Christmas Eve celebration at this congregation. It is the very best time to extend an invitation to a sinner we know. John speaks to the tax collectors and soldiers and others of his day. He does not demand they change their jobs or leave their livelihoods, but he exhorts them to lives of service and love within them. For a first century Jew, the idea that a tax collector could do his job rightly was unthinkable, but not for the last prophet of God's Old Testament people.

We too are given eyes by God to see the neighbor differently. Our repentance has taught us humility. No one is saved because he or she did something right. If that was required, we would all be in trouble. We are saved because Jesus did something right. He came with purifying fire and gifts of the Spirit and now salvation belongs to all humanity, it is a gift given freely to everyone, even the church skippers.

This Christmas Eve is not a day for us, it is a day for them. We know the one whose name and infant glory we worship. They don't. Don't you think it is high time they got to know what brings you such great joy. Invite a friend to church this Christmas Eve.

Three years ago the brothers thought that the two sermons could be well combined into one. I think that this could work, but the preacher has to be careful that he does not lose some focus in doing so. The problem with sermons that try to do too much is that they often accomplish so little.

4. Who can stand on that day? (OT/Epistle – That the hearer would be stirred up by God's grace to a life of joyful service to God and man.)

This sermon will have some things in common with sermon #1. It will ask the question of who can stand on that day. But it will do this somewhat differently. The question will be obviously difficult to consider. We are hardly able to consider the judgment of God without fear and trepidation. Malachi paints this as refining fire, fullers soap, a terrible event which he imagines that none will be able to withstand. But he gives a hint at the end of the text when he speaks of God never changing – loving even the unlovable.

But Paul provides a very interesting resolution to this. God, who began a good work in us (Baptism) will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus. This is God's work.

This might lead to passive Christianity, however, without vss 9-11. This pure and blameless life to which Christ builds us is not passive, nor is it non-participatory on our part. It is a life which overflows with love for one another, which is serving and loving and abounding in a holy joy.

That said, Christ enables us to stand on that day. It is a promise made to us in our baptism. God will complete this good work, all flesh shall see this salvation of God, it will be visible for all to see, the goodness which Christ has imparted to me and my heart will be evident in every part of me and my life.

So, who can stand on that Day? You can stand on that Day. Christ makes it so.

We thought that the prayer might make a good introduction here – what do you mean that you prayed that God would stir up our hearts?