

Weekly Reading – Monday, November 30, 2009

We move now to Advent II, the lessons for Sunday, December 6, 2009. As the saying goes, "There's good news and there's bad news." The news is the same: The Lord is coming. Whether it's good or bad depends on who you are and where you're sitting.

Malachi 3: 1 - 4

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament and has a definite anticipatory aspect, as one might argue does Revelation also. It's important for preachers to spend some time with the first two chapters of Malachi in order to establish the context of the text. In those early chapters there is a dispute going on between the people and the prophet. The people here are whiners (which I am too at times). They complain that God isn't doing much and the God of justice is just smoke and mirrors. Malachi says God isn't the problem, they are. Chapter two ends with the whiners asking, "Where is the God of justice?" They imagine it to be a debating point or rhetorical question, but Malachi answers the question. The God they seek (not really) is on the way and soon to arrive. There's a bit of sarcasm in the prophet's words. In verse 1 he speaks of "the God whom they seek" and the messenger "in whom they delight." Actually there's no such positive vibe. So in verse 2 there's a reversal, "But who can endure the day of his coming?" In our time the complaint that there is no justice is still strong. We also hear a variation, "Nothing matters, what I do doesn't matter." Malachi and Advent say, "Not so. It does matter." Good news or bad news?

Philippians 1: 3 - 11

So far this Advent the epistle lessons could be described as "Paul on a real good day." Warm, affectionate and encouraging! "I thank my God every time I remember you," opens Paul. Wow! The bond is real, and the tone throughout this letter, written from jail is warm and positive. The Philippians are supporting Paul's ministry with prayers and financial support. They are "partners in ministry." It's an Advent text because Paul reminds them that they aren't there yet and God isn't done with them yet. They haven't arrived. There is yet more truth and light, as we say in the UCC, to be revealed. God is still speaking! The "day of Christ," is real, coming and remains in the hidden future. As they eagerly await it's coming, Paul encourages them to keep hope alive and let love overflow "so that in the day of Christ, you may be pure and blameless." Wonderful continuity between Malachi and Philippians, but for one the news is bad news, for the other good.

Luke 3: 1 - 6

This is the first of two lessons centered on John the Baptist, the one sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. There's a long run-up of historical names and locations which serves two purposes. One, it locates the story now unfolding in real time and history and moreover in world history. The Jewish messiah and the gospel has to do with more than Israel or the church. The message, as Luke will say over and over again, is for all people and universal. The second thing this list does is paradoxical. The word of God doesn't come to the high and mighty nor to their courts or palaces, but to a bearded wild man in the desert. In

this sense there is a parallel to the Nativity story in chapter 2, where the mighty ones are noted, but the birth happens in "little Bethlehem" and in a stable out back, not in the palace. It seems that it's hard to hear God very well when life is too comfortable, when we're too powerful, when we are unaware of alternate frequencies of communication other than those of the powers that be. So the word comes not to Tiberius in Rome, but to John in the Judean wilderness. The result is that John says, "It's time for a new beginning." Again, whether this is good news or not so good depends. For some, the word that God is ready to make a new beginning is the best news ever. For others, less so. It's a challenge to position all this in relation to Christmas which as a holiday has its own imperatives and preparations, many of which don't support the repentance/ forgiveness that John preaches. But maybe the preacher's task is to deepen the potential and meaning of Christmas, and there's no better way to do that than by taking John and Advent seriously and joyfully.