

God Comes Home 2: *Company's Coming*

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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. ²But 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; ³he 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. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:1-6

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, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as 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. ⁵Every 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; ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

On December 17th, 1903, when Wilbur and Orville Wright finally achieved their historic airplane flight on the beach near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, they sent home a telegram reporting their success. The telegram concluded with the words, “Home Christmas.”

Anyone who has ever negotiated an airport or train station or a difficult drive through winter weather to get home for Christmas knows the poignancy of these words. Those who put up the tree, and fill the house with the sweet smells of holiday baking, while awaiting the arrival of loved ones, resonates with them. The notion permeates much of what we sing about and celebrate - being Home for Christmas. *If only in my dreams.*

It’s a paradox, perhaps, since the birth of Jesus, born occurred a long way from home. Luke describes Mary giving birth in a first century primitive motel, a guest house or cave out back, a shared space with the barn animals. United Methodist pastor and theologian, Ellsworth Kalas, once said it this way: Jesus was born not in a home, but rather a crude shelter for public lodging, so that wherever we are – we are at home in him. We cannot point to a particular place where he was born and put up a historical marker... because he was born in each of us.¹

So during this season of Advent, we are looking at these old familiar texts through the lens of what it means that God comes home to us. At home among the human family God draws us toward a future of hope and peace fulfilled. So last week, on the first Sunday of Advent, we began with an eye toward the Second Coming of the Risen Christ to redeem all of creation. Today, our scripture readings focus our attention on how to get ready. The Old Testament prophet Malachi points toward a messenger who will come and say prepare the way for the coming of God by your righteousness, your integrity, your right relationship to God and

¹ J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Christmas from the Backside*, “Celebrating Christmas in a Hotel,” p. 37 ff

faithfulness to God's law. Then John the Baptist picks up the prophetic mantle and says, *Company's Coming*. It's time to get ready! Here's what you need to do.

Now, before we consider John's baptism of repentance, of turning away from the corrupt and evil ways of the world in order to turn toward God we need to recall the particular context Luke describes of that time. Luke's introduction of John the Baptizer a bit like Google Earth panning down, down, down through geographical layers of the vast Roman Empire to the shores of the Jordan riverbank. As it descends, the camera hovers over some palaces and courts and those who populate them at this particular moment in time. Listen to who is jam-packed into the two-verse introduction of John the Baptizer, which is – also of course - the intro to Jesus. *During the reign of Emperor Tiberius*. Tiberius ruled the Roman Empire and activated martial law at a moment's notice to squash dissent. *When Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea*. Theologian Karl Barth once said Pilate enters the Apostles Creed like “a wild dog into a nice room.” His cruel presence in this opening act is meant to foreshadow a brutal crucifixion to come. *Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis*. These ruthless brothers, conjoined to Roman power, were infamous for being blood thirsty, murdering their own family members to stay in power. *Lysanias, ruler of Abilene*, had Greek ties, and ruled near the city of Damascus. He traded in women as well as money, offering 500 women in exchange for something he wanted. He stood at the heart of political and military power, until slain by Marc Anthony at the instigation of Cleopatra. Finally, Luke announces *the high priests Annas and Caiaphas*. Though they are religious leaders, they too come from a ruling class, and under Roman rule they were willing to sell out to keep the peace with the oppressor.

We can look around our world today and substitute any number of wealthy, politically self-serving, over-reaching ruler from here to China into any one of these first century players. You know, when people wag their finger at me saying you need to keep politics out of the pulpit, I wish

I had some kind, pastoral, winsome way of saying, have you ever read your Bible? In the Bible, in the birth narrative, in the life and ministry of Jesus, and at his crucifixion – where today’s characters we also be standing - you cannot get to Jesus without going through the powers of this world – the political, social, international realities – in real time. Luke is pointing to competing world views by saying God enters human history during the worst of times. Warfare, conquered kingdoms harshly ruled by political oppression, brutal military occupation, and misery for the great majority suffering under it – that is precisely the time the Great God of all Creation chose to make a home among us. In a time, quite like our time, John the Baptist says, Company is Coming, it’s time to get ready for the Advent of our God.

Now, it also needs to be said that, into this violent and politically fraught moment, John does not call the people to stage a rebellion or insurrection or start a peasant war revolution. John calls them away from it all, out into the wilderness – and John says come to me and be baptized for repentance. He will say more than that – in the next few verses – about what we should do. He will give us a list of ethics for Christmas; we will get to that next week. Today, our focus is on personal repentance. Given the social, political context I’ve just described, it is as if John the Baptizer says, if you want to prepare for the coming of God, before you can change or make a difference in this world, you need to look inward first. Leave the capital city and its intrigue behind, turn your back to the alluring call of worldly wealth and power and the need to be in control, and turn toward God with open hearts and readiness to receive and live by love, justice, and peace, in order to serve God where there is need among God’s children.

John begins his sermon by addressing individuals. He calls us to turn our hearts to God and live in a manner that is pleasing to God. He will say, there are moral, ethical demands placed upon us, but the only way to begin

is to start with yourself - repent, be washed, be made clean and ready for the coming of God.

Sam Wells is Vicar of St. Martin in the Fields, that famous church that sits on Trafalgar Square in London, with an amazing weekly concert schedule, remarkable outreach ministry to the poor, and a welcomed lunch stop for locals and tourists. But Sam Wells began his ministry far from this grand location in the City of Westminster in London. When he was a young pastor, he was appointed to a tiny Church of England parish on the edge of town, with a worshipping congregation of about 15. A few months before Christmas they made a leaflet announcing all of their upcoming services and he insisted there should be one for Midnight Communion. No one in that congregation ever remembered going to church at midnight, but in his youthful enthusiasm, the young priest added the service and thought it would be a great opportunity for the whole community. The leaflet was circulated to more than three thousand homes in the neighborhood.

Christmas Eve arrived, 11 pm. No one came. 11:15 – no one was there. He says he started crying because he had tried so hard. For a moment he dared to hope, but felt like he had failed. He wondered if the church were dying. He cried because he felt humiliated. So at 11:30 as he was starting to close up and go home, he heard a rustling noise. The door opened and into the church walked a man and a woman, maybe late 40's. He'd never seen them before.

“Is it just us?” they asked. “I’m afraid it is” he replied, wondering if they were going to laugh at him. “Oh good,” the woman said. “We waited outside in the garden to see if anyone else would come, and when we thought we’d be the only ones, we walked in. Perplexed, the young pastor said, “How do you mean?” as he gestured for them to sit down. After all, he thought, who wants to be alone with an underachieving pastor on Christmas Eve? Well, she began, “I guess you should know that my husband and I used to be married to different people until recently. There

are a lot of folks unhappy about us being together. We moved out here because we didn't feel we could go to any of the downtown churches. In fact, we haven't been to church in over a year. We were frightened to come tonight, but when we saw we'd be the only ones we got the courage to walk through the door. They said, "Our lives are such a mixture of love and of shame. We want to begin again."

Years later, when he had the age and wisdom to reflect on that moment, Sam Wells wrote, "I stared at them in silence for a long time. It was a man and woman in need of God. It was a story of death and fear and sin and shame and tears."² And yet, by that act of repentance, "it was becoming a new beginning and life and trust and change and love."

Friends, the world is in a hot mess just now, God knows. We are living in a time when billionaires have too much wealth and power while the masses of poor are unsheltered and starving. The autocratic political dynamics across the globe feel unstable and frightening. It's not the first time, but it is the precis time when God enters in to make a home among the human family. God comes home to put the powers of earth on notice that injustice shall come to an end. John the Baptizer again has come calling, to say, Company is coming. It's time to get ready. That readiness does not begin with a political fix, or a global realignment of power. It begins in the human heart of individuals who are like that couple on Christmas Eve looking for forgiveness and a new beginning, who are on the lookout for God. For we – all of us – are their mixture of love and sin and shame. If we want to be hopeful, faithful followers of Jesus Christ to make a difference in this world, let's begin with ourselves. Repent, John says, for Company's coming... the Advent of God is near.

AMEN.

² Samuel Wells, *The Moment of Truth*, pp 79-80.