

“He Comes with a Purpose”
Malachi 3: 1 – 4 Luke 3: 1 – 6
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While I love the Advent and Christmas Season, I figure that if we are going to put so much effort into it, we should at least know something about its value and purpose.

One way to approach the matter is to ask about the purpose of Jesus’ life and teachings. According to the Scriptures, the coming of the Messiah had been anticipated for hundreds of years. It appears that people in Jesus’ time did not discriminate between their religious identity as Jews and their political fortunes as a nation. Much of the language in the Old Testament that describes the Messiah is ambiguous, so they could easily have conceived of a Messiah who was certainly a religious leader, but who also would be expected to improve their condition as a nation. They believed that the Messiah was to be born in the lineage of King David and was expected to restore the country to political independence (like it was thought to have been in the time of David) after hundreds of years of political control by other nations. We can understand that when life is oppressive, people often seek a hero who will fix things by eliminating the powerful factions and by replacing the present leadership with members of the oppressed group. This familiar scenario usually involves a change in political leadership, not a change in political structure. The political game continues to be played by the same rules.

If the purpose of Jesus’ coming is to change things dramatically what might be the nature of the change. Jesus wanted people to build their systems and relationships on love, so transformation in external society reflects the changes in the hearts of individuals. We heard a reading today that point to Jesus’ purpose in coming. The Gospel of Luke identifies John the Baptist as the “Voice of one crying in the wilderness” by means of a quotation from the Prophet Isaiah. At the end of the quotation we find the words, “and all flesh shall see the salvation of God”.

Because you have been exposed to religious language, the word “salvation” is familiar to you and clearly refers to some activity of saving, although you may find it hard to understand what it really is. One question is, “What or who is to be saved?” The Jews of Jesus’ time thought about salvation in political terms: like being saved from the tyranny of the Roman Empire. Christians, though, often think of salvation as the rescue of the individual soul from eternal suffering. Both meanings of salvation require a heroic figure, perhaps a messiah) whose role is to remove something or someone from harm’s way. While both are legitimate, another seems to be in closer harmony with Jesus’ gospel message. In both Greek and Aramaic languages, the word for salvation can also be translated as “healing”. This meaning helps, but, even healing can be variously understood: as the physical healing of an individual, the healing of a relationship, or the healing of the very fabric of community. Note that salvation concerns the community at least as much as it concerns the individual.

The Hebrew prophet, Malachi, tells us that a coming messenger (or messiah, perhaps), will establish a new covenant among God and humans. Remember, in a covenant, as opposed to a contract, one party’s commitment does not depend on the behavior of the other. The commitment to the well being of the other continues in force, no matter what.

Malachi says this messenger will “purify the descendants of Levi (priests) and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness”. In Malachi, this purification is based in judgment against the “sorcerers” (meaning those who manipulate power to their own selfish ends), “adulterers” (who do not honor the commitments they have made), “those who swear falsely” (who are fundamentally dishonest), “those who oppress their workers, widows, and orphans” (who are fundamentally unjust in their practices).

Judgment will also be against “those who thrust aside the alien” (who are not hospitable and perhaps who prejudge anyone who is different), and it will be against those who do not “fear the lord” (that is to say, who do not value something more comprehensive than their own selfish desires). So, Trust, Faithfulness, Honesty, Justice, Hospitality, and Honoring the Presence of the Divine in all creation, are the values that transform communities and make them healthy. From this perspective, salvation could be seen as the embodiment of these divine characteristics in our human relationships and communities in a way that transforms (or to use Malachi’s words, purifies and refines) them.

If salvation, then, means increasing health, let’s remember that any healthy person or system naturally grows towards maturity. And maturity engenders full participation in relationship and community.

Any quality or behavior that inhibits the growth, development, and healing of relationships and communities inhibits the purpose of Jesus. He came so that all people could grow into their fullness. (This is my interpretation of Jesus words: “I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly”.) And he aimed his most challenging criticisms at those who inhibited the process, either for themselves or for anyone else.

So, how does all this talk of salvation and transformation fit into our understanding of Advent as a time of preparation? First of all, what kind of a messiah we are looking for? Do we want a personal or political rescuer, or do we want someone who encourages growth towards maturity? In much of Christianity today, people are taught not to take responsibility for the quality of their relationships or the health of their community . The focus is on their personal salvation, and on putting Christians into positions of political power. Then, they believe, the political system can demand compliance from the people. In my estimation, that approach is not consistent with Jesus’ purposes.

Perhaps our Advent expectations might involve a desire to have our hearts transformed into a more mature condition. That transformation requires our willingness to be affected by the transformation of others around us. Are we then prepared to assume the responsibilities that come with maturity?

In recent history, our cultural celebration during the Advent/Christmas season has become focused almost exclusively on gift giving. Even though we might see Jesus is a gift to us, and that he welcomes us into “the salvation of God”, too often we focus on the receiving and giving part, instead. Seen correctly, even gifts can have transforming power. Look back over the most significant gifts you have received, you can probably see how those gifts have transformed your

life or relationships in some significant ways. Such gifts might take up more of your time. They might cause you to learn new things. They might take you away from other important matters in your life. Or they might convince you how much the giver cares about you. We cannot say for sure if the changes will be positive or negative, but real gifts are always transforming in some way.

We can also be transformed by our giving. The giver is transformed by taking the time to select the most appropriate or meaningful gift. Whether giving or receiving in Jesus name, our transformation into maturity is the real gift. According to the scriptures, “salvation” or, if you prefer, healing, expresses divine transformation in response to human need.

So, I challenge all of us to use this Advent season preparing for the transformations to come. Let us get ready to celebrate the divine new life which is born to us, and let us do our own giving and receiving, prepared for sacred transformation as individuals and as a community.

One final thought, this congregation’s emerging ministry is a gift to the wider community. In wisdom and faith, I encourage you to make it useful in transforming yourselves and the community you serve. May God support your giving, your receiving, and your ongoing journey in faith.