***ADVENT QUESTIONS***

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Texts: Malachi 3:1-7 and Luke 3:1-6

Elie Wiesel, the noted writer and Nobel Prize winner, tells a story of his childhood. Each day when he arrived home from school, his mother would ask him a question, not “How was your day?” or “What did you learn?” but “Did you have a good question today?”[[1]](#endnote-1) It seems a worthwhile question to ask on any given day, but especially in this Advent season: **Do you have a good question today?** Does Advent stir in you any wonder or curiosity or doubts, or do you just plow through it on your way to Christmas with nothing but shopping lists and visions of sugar plums dancing in your heads?

Advent is a season full of questions – some of them good questions and some of them pretty perfunctory. Among family, friends, and fellow shoppers we hear: *What do you want for Christmas? Would you like this purchase gift-wrapped? Will it be a white Christmas?* and *How did these lights get so tangled*? Our opening hymn posed a thoughtful question of God: *O Lord, how shall I meet you, how welcome you aright?* while Christmas carols ask:

*Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong?* and

*What child is this, who laid to rest, on Mary’s lap is sleeping?* and

*Mary, Mary, what you gonna name that baby*? and

*What star is this with beams so bright?*

According to Luke, after the angel Gabriel tells her of the child she will bear, Mary asks, “*How can this be?*” and when the child leaps in Elizabeth’s womb at her encounter with pregnant Mary, she asks, “*Why has this happened to me*?” And when John the Baptist is born and Zechariah is able to speak again after nine months of silence, the people wonder, “*What then will this child become?*” And wise men from the East ask, “*Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?*”

Who, what, where, when, why, how – these are Advent questions that permeate the Christmas story and our remembrance of it all. The Gospels, Luke in particular, offer answers to many of these questions, but not all of them. Some questions still linger and new questions arise. One of those questions on your mind this morning may be: Why read words from the prophet Malachi in Advent? Luke tells a better story, and Malachi is little known and rarely read; those who know his name at all probably know it only because his is the last book in the Old Testament before we turn the page to the good news of the gospels.

The name Malachi means “my messenger.” We know nothing of him as a prophet; we don’t even know whether his name was really Malachi or if it is just a title for whoever delivered the message. In just 55 verses, Malachi raises 22 questions, so he fits right in to this Advent season which is so full of questions. He speaks at a time when the people of Israel have returned from exile, and the priests seem to be failing in their basic duties. Malachi warns them that the Lord is about to set things right so that righteousness will be restored, and for them that will not be particularly good news unless they get their act in order. The passage I read this morning from the 3rd of just 4 chapters raises two questions about the coming of the Lord and the coming of the messenger from the Lord. The first is:

*Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears, for he is like a refiner’s fire and fuller’s soap?*

If that passage sounds somewhat familiar, it is likely because in it you hear strains of Handel’s *Messiah*. Charles Jennens who wrote the text of *Messiah* chose this passage from Malachi to raise that sobering question about God’s coming among us, before offering an answer about who it is who comes – the child born to Mary who is Emmanuel, God with us.

The coming of the Lord is not all rosy promises for all people. Mary’s Magnificat speaks of God scattering the proud in their thoughts, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, and filling the hungry with good things while sending the rich away empty. It is good news for the down and out, but sobering news for the rich and powerful. Mary’s words carry echoes of Malachi’s warning. God comes to set things right and those who have been wronged rejoice, while those who have been the wrongdoers should tremble in their boots! The Lord comes to refine, to restore, to put right, not to burn it all down, but to purify it all, and in so doing there will be those who do not hear that message as good news. You might ask yourself, “Is it good news for me, this coming of God, or is it my life that is to be refined and reordered and maybe redeemed?

In his critique of the priests and the people, Malachi suggests that they, like their ancestors, have turned aside from God’s ways and gone their own way. Yet God does not give up on them. God encourages them to change their ways: “*Return to me, and I will return to you*,” says the Lord of Hosts. And it is that invitation that gives rise to the second question posed by Malachi, “*How shall we return?*” If we like sheep have gone astray, how shall we return to the Good Shepherd?

After the first presentation of *Messiah* in London in 1741, Handel wrote to a friend: “*I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wished to make them better*.”[[2]](#endnote-2) It is not just in hearing the strains of Messiah that we are made better; it is in embracing the good news which is proclaimed in its words. It is in returning to God and God’s ways that we are made better. But how shall we return? “Revere my name,” says the Lord through Malachi. “Remember Moses’ teachings about my way,” he says. Five hundred years later John the Baptist will say it more succinctly from the wilderness: “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!”

We return to God by repenting of our sins. The word for repent is rooted in the word for turning. Repenting is turning – turning away from sin and turning back to God. “*Return to me, and I will return to you*,” says the Lord. We may think of Lent as being the season of repentance, and it is; but Malachi and John remind us that Advent too is a season for repentance, for turning back to God. It is a time to prepare not only our homes but also our hearts for Christ’s coming by cleaning out the rotten stuff that has been accumulating there throughout the year or across the years. It is jettisoning the baggage of the year gone by in order to return to God and God’s ways.

One of the recurring Advent questions that I get in this space is: What is the deal with the colors? Is the proper color for Advent blue like the pulpit cloth or purple like the Advent candles? For centuries purple was the color of choice for Advent. It is a royal color fitting for One born King of the Jews, a child before whom wisemen from the East humbly kneel. Purple is the color of Matthew’s proclamation of Jesus’ birth – the proclamation of a child born in the royal line of David, the One for whom the messenger prepares the way. But purple is also a color tied to penitence; it is a Lenten color that calls us to repent of our sins and so to prepare our hearts for the coming of the King. As such, it echoes those words of Malachi: “*Return to me, and I will return to you*,” says the Lord.Purple reminds us that Advent and Lent are closely linked. Christmas means nothing without Easter; Jesus’ birth is meaningless without the Resurrection. Advent and Lent, Christmas and Easter – these are entwined in meaning and in our memories.

Blue, by contrast, is the color of Luke’s testimony. It is the color traditionally chosen by artists for pregnant Mary’s garb, and so reminds us of the faithfulness, obedience, and expectation with which Mary bore the Son of God. It is a symbol of humility, hope, and expectation of the coming of the Messiah. Blue lifts up the hope Malachi holds out in his proclamation of the coming of the *messenger of the covenant in whom you delight* and the hope offered in John’s mission to prepare the way of the Lord so that *all flesh will see the salvation of God*! Since the mid-twentieth century, many churches have turned to blue as the color for Advent. As one pastor urged:

*Change the colors! Change the hues!*

*No more purples! Bring out the blues!*[[3]](#endnote-3)

In so doing, we lift up the hope Christ offers in his birth and the hope we hold for his glorious return, the hope of Advent.

Penitence or hope? Purple or blue? What should be the color for Advent – the proper color to prepare for the coming of Christ? The prophecies of Malachi and John bear both purple and blue messages – repent yet hope! Perhaps therein lies the answer. Perhaps Advent’s colors should be an entwining of the two – purple and blue, humility and hope, penitence and peace. Of such entwined yarns was the curtain in the Tabernacle made. Perhaps it is in entwining these colors in this sacred space and in our lives that we properly prepare for Christ’s coming, entwining penitence and hope to embrace the babe born in Bethlehem who is the Messiah, the Son of God, our Savior. Now, any questions? Amen

1. Deborah Block, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol.1*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor eds., Westminster John Knox Press:2009, p.26 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Id. at p.30 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John Sonnenday in the Immanuel Presbyterian Church newsletter, November 28, 1993 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)