

Embracing the Prophetic in Advent
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Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 3:1-6

Driving on the 476 extension, as one does, one sees a variety of billboards. Many are encouraging me to make a wager on a sporting event, something I long ago decided was a fool's errand. Others promote one housing development or another, or one restaurant or another.

A certain series of billboards never fails to catch my eye. I bet you have seen them as well. Use your own terminology – evangelical, conservative, fundamentalist. No website given, just an 800 phone number, that ends with “T-R-U-T-H.” I resonate with some of the messages; others, less so. One included an admonition to “love your neighbor;” we’ve had the same language on the church’s front yard banner during COVID. It’s a good reminder.

My most recent encounter with such a sign had a very Advent feel to it, intentional or not. It showed a wavy line, kind of like a heart monitor, that quickly transitioned into a straight line. A heart beating, and then stopped, a life transitioning to death.

The caption was more subtle and nuanced than it might have been and sometimes is – I am used to seeing signs assessing my comfort level between heaven and hell, eternal life or eternal damnation. This one, again, more subtle, nuanced. Alongside the wavy line, then straight line was a question: “Are you preparing to meet Jesus.” Are you preparing to meet Jesus?”

The wavy line/straight line premise, therefore, suggests that the moment you die, you will meet Jesus, and that there are things you can be doing now – preparation – to ensure a more positive outcome to that encounter.

It’s a good question. Still, I question the premise. I do believe, with the belief on this side of death, that I will somehow encounter God when I die, and you will as well. My problem is with the understanding of that moment, a presumed

instantaneous moment of judgment, with a fixed set of criteria, our eternal disposition hanging on a set of beliefs or behaviors.

I don't think that's how God is. I don't think that's what Jesus came to do. So the premise, not so much. Still – that question. I like it, minus the heart monitor imagery and its implications. “Are you preparing to meet Jesus?” Preparing, not prepared. A journey. Are you preparing to meet Jesus?

We use a set of words in Advent – anticipation, expectation, preparation. We live, as we said last week, between the already-here and the not-yet. The Christ child has been born into the world, and, we prepare for his coming again. We live in that in-between time. We know the old, old story, and however we think of Christ coming again, if we think of it at all, it hasn't happened yet, or in any way we might understand it. So here we are – living in the in-between time, expecting, anticipating, preparing, and doing so with an active, rather than passive approach, because we take the call to prepare seriously.

For what do we prepare? We prepare for guests coming to our home – some of us will have the house pretty much ready to go while others will scramble and toss things into a closet hoping that no one will look. We prepare for an exam – some will have done the course reading all the way along and some will cram at the last minute and hope for the best. I have fallen into the first option of those two examples.

But this is different. This is not about a foxhole conversion or a death bed confession. That's why the premise of the billboard is wrong. Faith is a journey, not a flip on the light switch moment. Advent calls us closer to what our lives might look like, but if we have been paying attention all along, it's a course correction rather than a 180 turnaround. And when that 180 turnaround is needed, so be it; even that happens not out of a sense of fear – if I don't do this I will be consigned to hell or if I don't stop doing that I am damned – but, rather, God's extraordinary love for us. Advent words are hope and love and joy and peace, not fear and fear and fear and judgment. Remember that.

We wade into the world of the prophets in Advent, and are not always sure what to do with their words. They come with baggage – the old stereotypes of an agitated, wild person with a sign at a street corner screaming to no one in

particular that the end is near, or a wild prediction about this thing or the other that something is wrong with no solution offered.

That is not what the biblical prophets do, despite the difficulty of their calling and the challenges they place before us. Prophets look around, see what's wrong, declare it, and, if they are a biblical prophet, suggest an alternative, an alternative filled with hope.

This week we get Malachi, a little-known prophet from eight centuries before the birth for which we are preparing. And we get John the Baptist – we get him next week, too – and I still confess that I don't always know what to do with John. But keep preparation in mind. Keep love in mind. Keep the in-between times in mind. "I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me," Malachi proclaims on behalf of God. And we will be cleaned as if with a strong and powerful soap, and we will be purified like metal in a fire. That is intense imagery, but not fearful. The point of all of this is not to make us afraid, but to make us ready. Clean. Pure.

Scott Hoezee writes: "... Malachi was charged by God to get the people's attention. He had to return God to the center of their lives. The good news is that if the people could achieve that kind of God-consciousness in their daily lives, God would shine down on them like a sun of righteousness with healing in his wings. If the people could come to realize once again that following God's Law is not a restrictive way to live but a liberating one, then they would discover a freedom and a joy they had never before known."

Preparation is about discovering liberation and joy. That's a far cry from being scared into behavior modification.

And John, the one who baptized, traveling around the north country, preaching, we are told, "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Again, this imagery can fit into that same billboard theology, but let's dig deeper. "Prepare the way of the Lord," John proclaims, reaching back into the tradition and the prophet Isaiah. Make things level. Make things smooth. Make the path of life and faith navigable. Again, for John, preparation is not about setting up a moralistic obstacle course, or a fear-based litmus test.

Chelsey Harmon writes that John envisions faith as accessible to all, not some. For John, preparation is about "re-orient(ing) and re-center(ing) one's self on the

purposes of God. Once we've confessed what is not right, the other action that makes up our turning is to commit ourselves to the opposite action—to the way of God. And we do this because we are forgiven. We aren't trying to earn it or make up for it, but out of the grace of forgiveness that washes over us, we know we can repent without fear and re-commit ourselves to God."

Life feels difficult enough right now – on a personal level and a communal level – without needing to be afraid of God. Preparation, therefore, can be about course correction, about changing behavior when needed, about re-evaluating perspectives, yes. But done from hope, not fear, done because of God's love, rather than threat of punishment.

What does preparation look like? It means embracing the prophetic, claiming your inner prophet. That can seem daunting. Even when we understand prophet in a biblical way, proclaiming God's alternative vision, the prophetic needs are so big. Climate change. Racism. Poverty. Gun violence. What difference can I – little old prophet me – make?

And it is true that each of us, and all of us collectively, share that calling. That's a part of it. Yet Walter Brueggemann writes that "...prophetic ministry does not consist of spectacular acts of social crusading or of abrasive measures of indignation. Rather, prophetic ministry consists of offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God's freedom and God's will for justice. The issues of God's freedom and God's will for justice are not always and need not be expressed primarily in the big issues of the day. They can be discerned wherever people try to live together and worry about their future and their identity."

As noted, one of the big Advent words is joy. Embracing your inner prophet – along with the requisite seriousness of the task and the sometimes-formidable nature of the challenge – should ultimately produce a sense of joy. Joy in living a liberated life. Joy in aligning yourself and the world with God's vision. Of John the Baptist, Willie Dwayne Francois III writes: "The God of justice bypasses the game of thrones and disrupts trickle-down religion through a wild man in the middle of nowhere."

Then Francois asks: "What if God is calling us to a wild life—not an existence of convenience, settling, respectability, or compliance? The domesticating character of religion can crush us into dust trampled over by the ruling classes or cram us into the miserable mold of a status quo gasping for the rarified air

of authenticity. It is an existential tragedy to live high on public compliance but deficient of divine love.”

Francois writes: “Advent is a call to go wild for love, integrity, and justice. It endorses a tolerance for waiting, but not at the expense of adventure. We cautiously move through our days too tamed, too domesticated, too programmed to be open to divine intrusions.”

Francois concludes: “Away from the trappings of the society that has poisoned their thinking and contaminated their spirits, John fills the airways of the wilderness with a voice of personal and social liberation. The contagious movement of life transforms a wilderness into a sanctuary.”

I love that – transforming a wilderness into a sanctuary. Transforming fear into joy. Transforming the call to prepare from a burden to a welcome invitation, done for all the right reasons while the wrong reasons are left in our rearview mirror. Expectation. Anticipation. Preparation. Good news is coming – and it is already here. Amen.