

December 6, 2018

Malachi 3: 1-4

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Do We Know Our Name”

We know the Grinch stole Christmas, don't we? Well...he tried. As the story goes, the Grinch tried to take Christmas away, he tried to steal its beauty and its meaning, he tried to wrap up the Christmas spirit and bury it deep within his mountain cave, but he failed. I'm appealing to the children today or to the child within because sometimes it's at this pure and simple place inside of us where we see the truth most clearly. The Grinch tried to steal Christmas but he could not do it. Our kids and grandkids know this and it points to our purpose for this morning in that, ultimately, what God intends for us and what God makes of us will not be denied. Dr. Seuss created the cartoon character and while it's all make-believe there is a strong thread of truth at the core of the story. Every year there is the risk that some situation or a particular disappointment or some unexpected trouble in our lives will try to steal Christmas away from us. If this happens it will not be without a fight. We decorate our homes. We bake cookies. We plan parties. We take trees cut down from a farm or out of a box and plant them in our living rooms and cover them with ornaments and lights. In the Church, we hang our banners and sing carols and light another candle on our wreath; we do all of it with the expectation that Christmas is on the way. But he's a mean one, Mr. Grinch, and we are always vulnerable. One of the reasons we find it important to come together and worship, especially this time of year, is to encourage one another to be honest about our world and our lives. We expect Christmas to come, we want Christmas to come, but the spirit of it, the heart and soul of it, the very purpose of this season and the celebration that is near can slip away. Therefore, the message we carry today from this sanctuary and into the world is that no matter what is happening God comes to us and God is with us. There is no threat, make-believe or real, that can get in the way of this good news.

This morning our reading comes from the unfamiliar writings of Malachi, a small book of the bible that lies in the shadows of the more well-known and often quoted biblical prophets. Because Malachi is speaking to us as a prophet today it's a good time to be reminded what a prophet in the bible is exactly. Biblical prophets aren't so much about predicting what will happen in the future as they are telling it like it is in the present. Malachi looked at the people. He observed the ways they went about their worship. He paid attention to whether or not what they professed with lips lined up with how they lived. In other words, Malachi wasn't interested in just talking about faith. He was concerned about the depth of faith. Let me appeal to the child within us, once again, and connect back to Dr. Seuss. Do you remember the problem with the Grinch's heart? As Malachi looked at people's relationship with God he was convinced the authenticity of their faith was slipping away because their hearts had grown too hard and too small. His words were harsh. "God is about to show up," he preached. "Just going through the motions of a life with God isn't going to cut it," he warned. There was an urgency to his message and while Malachi's words only take up a few pages in the bible his warning echoes through the ages. "The time is now and the moment is at hand. Return to God and be ready to open your heart to the true source of life." To this we can say, "Amen and amen."

Now, we can imagine the people's first reaction to Malachi's message had them shaking in their boots. The prophet didn't mince words about the advent of the Lord. "Who can endure the day of his coming," preached the prophet, "and who can stand when he appears?" (Mal. 3:2) Are we saying the coming of Christmas this year is supposed to make us feel like that? What the season of Advent does, in keeping with the tradition of the prophets, is invite us to honestly assess our lives and our world. As another of the prophets, Micah, says about what God demands of us, we are "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8) So, we know what God requires and we know we do not live this life with God as consistently or as faithfully as we want. And so, yes, hearing Malachi's message can leave us shaking with fear and trembling. But here's the thing, the way things are is only half the story. Being honest about ourselves and seeing the ways the world falls short is only the set up for the beautiful thing God is about to do. There's more and it's good news. Let's go back to our kids and to Dr. Seuss once more. We love the story not because the Grinch meets his demise but because he is changed. This is not a story of destruction and defeat. This is a story of new life. If we only focus on the Grinch's small heart or on his attempt to steal away Christmas we're only hearing half the story. The fullness of the story is how the true spirit of Christmas, the love that can never be taken, redeemed him and set him free. Malachi names the shallowness of faith in the people not for the purpose of reducing them to rubble but to prepare them for the rest of the story. God will come and with that coming is the possibility of a more pure and purposeful life. "Who can endure and who can stand when the Lord comes?" asks the prophet. We can and we will. We will stand in the confidence of our faith because God comes not to just tear down. God builds up. God comes not just to shine light on our imperfections but to shine light on the path we are to follow. This year we are preparing to celebrate Christmas in all its beauty and joy

because, as the gospel proclaims, Christ comes not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:17)

I mentioned Malachi is a relatively unknown prophet. I came across words from an even more obscure prophet by the name, Baruch. Baruch is unfamiliar to us because he didn't make the cut when it came to our bible. The Book of Baruch is included in the Roman Catholic bible and we recognize his words as part of the tradition of sacred writings but he got left out of our official scriptures, and that's a potential loss to us, except for today. This morning we will hear part of Baruch's message. His name, strange sounding as it is to us, in Hebrew means "blessing." Blessing describes his message well. Baruch's words are filled with hope. The prophet Malachi tells us the way it is and that the Lord is coming to set us straight. The prophet Baruch wants us to know what it will look like when God makes us right. Listen to his message as we move this unknown prophet to center stage. Listen for the way his voice speaks with hope as he tells us the rest of the story. "Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction," Baruch preaches, "put on forever the beauty of the glory from God...Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God...show your splendor everywhere under heaven...God will give you evermore the name, "Righteous Peace, Godly Glory." (Baruch 5:1-5) His name is Baruch. Our name is Righteous Peace, Godly Glory.

We've all got a variety of things on our Christmas Wish Lists. In our concern about what we want the prophet tells us what we will receive. When Christmas comes, when Christ comes, we will receive a new name and that name will be Righteous Peace and Godly Glory. In the bible, receiving a new name is the symbol for receiving new life. This is the gift, and it fits perfectly every time and nothing can take it away. We are Righteous Peace and Godly Glory, or in our own words we might say this way, we are Faithful and True, or in words that point to who Jesus is for us, we are Forgiven, and we are Loved, we are Redeemed.

To close the circle by turning to Dr. Seuss one more time, the fullness of the story wasn't what The Grinch wanted to do to Christmas but what Christmas finally and powerfully did to him. I'll still answer to the name Larry and you'll still go by the name you've been given in this world. These names tell part of our story. But the whole story is what God is coming to do again this Christmas. We are, all of us, Redeemed.