

December 9, 2012 / Second Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

Desert Places and Refining Fires

Malachi 3:1-4 *For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap...*

Luke 3:1-6 *...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.
He went into all the region around the Jordan,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins..."*

Luke is about to tell the story of Jesus' baptism, the beginning of his ministry. John the Baptist is calling people to prepare their lives for God's reign through a baptism of repentance. This may seem a strange story to hear when we are getting ready to celebrate Jesus' birth. Yet it reminds us that we are not celebrating Jesus' birth as though it were happening again. Jesus has already been born. His life and ministry have already taken place. The time for us is now, to look at our lives today in light of Jesus' life and teachings, his call to the way of prayer and service, and his empowering, guiding presence with us as his community. This is just the right message for Advent--a wake-up call for us as Jesus' followers and community in today's world.

Traditionally, Advent was a season of self-examination and penitence for the Christian community. After all, it is the first season of the church's liturgical year—a new beginning, or as Zen Buddhism says, starting from zero. That spirit of Advent became lost in the cultural version of Christmas, and lost its punch in the church itself. Advent became a cozy warm-up for a sentimentalized Christmas, instead of the white-hot wake up call on the lips of John the Baptist. Advent and Christmas are not about a sentimental journey to Bethlehem to see a cute little baby. This season sounds a call to re-assess and renovate our lives, to get ready for something to happen in and among us, what John and Jesus called the kingdom of God. John's call to repentance pierces the fog. It is a clarion call for the reawakening of our lives in relation to God.

Luke begins by listing the political and religious leaders of the world as he knew it. The Roman Emperor Tiberius. Pontius Pilate, installed by Rome to keep Judea under control. Herod, the king over Galilee, his brother Philip and three of Herod's sons, all keeping control over Israel. The high priests Annas and Caiaphas, holding the reins of religious power. Luke shows us all the power structures of the day, political and religious. Surely if God is going to

do something, it has to be through people and places of prominence and power.

However, Luke then writes, “the word of God came to”....Emperor Tiberius? Pontius Pilate? Herod and his family of rulers? The high priests? No. The word of God came to John, a strange, ragged, rough-hewn character, completely outside the established world of religion and politics. John is unplugged from the dominant political and religious culture of his day, from the games, the power-plays, the posturing, the wealth and its accompanying greed. His life is completely bare and open to God.

John was out in the wilderness, the desert, the place where human beings have nothing to lean on, nothing to hide behind, where they are face to face with their own bare humanity and with God. The desert, into which God led the people of Israel to teach them what it means to live by faith. The desert, where Jesus would struggle with temptations to abandon complete trust in and intimacy with God in favor of political, material, and religious "success". The desert is a very special place. A place of abandonment. A place of refuge. A place of deep solitude. A place of deepest silence where the whisperings of God can be heard and the winds of God's spirit felt. A place where we experience a kind of death and yet a kind of new life.

We were in a place like that last week. In New York City to see our son Kent, we visited the World Trade Center, or 9/11, Memorial. I was not that keen on going at first, but was very glad I went. The winding queue of hundreds of people moved us fairly quickly into the site itself. There were the two pools constructed on the locations of the twin towers. Water cascaded down the side walls into a shallow pool, then plunged again into a smaller square opening that gave the impression of being bottomless. The sound of the water and the feeling of downward plunging, like the towers themselves on that September morning, established a profound silence. The air was thick with sadness. Here and there, persons who were grieving for someone they knew, would touch with their fingers one of the many names etched into the marble borders around both pools. This was a desert place, in the midst of a great city full of endless distractions of noise and movement, wealth and power and self-importance. In that place of plunging water and deepest grief was where I sensed the word of God murmuring, the wind of God rising.

The voice of God is heard in the desert. The new winds of God rise up in the wilderness. The wilderness is that place, geographically or spiritually, where we are alone with God. It is the place where we see our addictions to the culture we live in and the misery they cause. It is where we perceive and are liberated from the dominating illusions of our culture. The desert may be that place of struggle or loneliness or fearfulness where we find

ourselves as the Christmas season approaches. It is a hard season when we think it is about lovely lights and spending money on gifts and being jolly all the time. The desert may be a sense of grief as we come to this holiday having lost someone we love. The desert may be the ongoing violence of war and the suffering of so many of our fellow human beings. The John the Baptist story is really good news, you see, because it tells us that the desert is exactly where the wind of God begins to rise, where the word of God is to be heard.

In the desert there is a turning around, a fresh beginning, the sounding of a clear call that tells us to whom we truly belong. John's message, as he comes out of the desert, the new wind at his back, is one of deep joy once we find how to hear it. It is a message of repentance, changing our minds, waking up, coming home to our true selves, the persons God made us to be. We make room in our lives for God's reign. We begin to clear the way to awareness of God's being with us everywhere, and in Jesus and the life he taught and embodied.

Advent is a season for us to go out into the desert. Another word for this kind of desert is solitude. Solitude is our capacity to be alone with God, to know ourselves in relation to God and to see our whole life in that relationship. Jesus found this solitude in the desert, the lonely places of prayer and silence. As we follow Jesus, as we also enter into that solitude, that desert, we begin to discern and follow God's will, to hear and speak God's words, to perceive and do the work to which we feel God calling us. We come out of the desert as different people, free people, able to live and to speak the truth we know in Jesus.

During this Advent, we as Jesus' community are called into that desert where the wind of God's new life is rising. How do we do it? Simply by practicing with greater care and attention the things to which we have committed ourselves. Going back to our set-aside daily times of silence, prayer, reflection, inner listening, study. Anchoring our lives in the inward journey that keeps us from being swept along by the currents of the cultural captivity of Christmas. This is practicing solitude, the desert, where we touch our lives in God. This is where we recognize and embrace the refining process of God in our lives. That is what Malachi speaks of.

Malachi is speaking in a time after the return of the people from exile in Babylon. The Jerusalem temple has been rebuilt, but already religious practice has deteriorated and the society has drifted back into injustice. It is like Thomas Merton wrote in one of his books about a moment in the monastery when the Abbott was addressing the community of brothers, and his frustration finally broke through: "You do holy things all day long without being holy!" We do religious things without being faithful, or loving, or peaceful, or just, or

compassionate, or merciful...toward others or ourselves. That's the spirit, I think, of Malachi's words as he talks about God's messenger coming to bring a renewed relationship with God. But it will come like a refiner's fire and like the fuller's soap. The refining fire, of course, is how metals are purified, the impurities burned away so that the metal becomes its truest self, we might say. The fuller's soap I always think of as lye soap that I remember some of my country relatives having around the house. Harsh and cleansing.

Malachi's words raised this thought for me this week. The message seems to be that the most helpful, healing, strengthening, growth-producing times in our lives are those that may have been the hardest, the most painful, the times when we had to confront something very difficult in ourselves or around us. I wrote a song back in seminary that had the line: "It's the times when you feel lost that make you new again." Somehow when things seem to be falling apart, that is where the new, the real is going to emerge, if we can remain open and peaceful through our inward journey practice.

Yet these refining moments and experiences don't always have to be only painful ones. They can be those persons or insights or openings that deepen us as persons, that expand our view of things, that help us see what was worthwhile and what we need to be let go of.

I would like to end right here, inviting us to reflect on these things in our own lives. The good news of Advent is that God is in the desert places, the places of solitude and awareness. And God is in the sometimes fiery refining moments of our lives, within those experiences we want to avoid or escape or pretend are not there. We might devote part of our inward journey time during this season to these questions: Looking back, where have the desert places been in my life? Where are my desert places at this time, where I might quiet myself enough to hear God's word, to feel the rising wind of God's spirit? What have been, and are today, the refining fire moments, experiences, and people, helping me to let go of what is empty or false or unimportant so that I become more and more my truest, God-created self? God's presence is everywhere in us and around us, even, and perhaps especially, in those desert and refining fire moments and places. Even there we can be at peace and unafraid. That's the Advent good news.