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Advent 2C
Peace, Seattle
December 6, 2015
Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6

IS GOD FIXING THIS OR NOT?

It's a short book, a scant four chapters spread over three pages; but in these pages God's messenger Malachi calls on God's people to awaken from what has become a tepid faith.

And it isn't an easy sell. A century before they'd returned from exile with hope held high. COMFORT, COMFORT MY PEOPLE! sang the prophet Isaiah. YOUR CAPTIVITY HAS ENDED AND GOD IS BUILDING A HIGHWAY THROUGH THE DESERT TO BRING YOU HOME.

Once home, they'd rebuilt the Temple and set about reclaiming the covenant that had given their ancestors identity and purpose as God's people.

But in the decades that followed, hope grew thin.
- The security of the nation was constantly at risk.
- No supernatural signs were given, as in days of old.
- And their expectation of what God would or could do for them began to fade.

The faith of Israel's spiritual leaders grew lukewarm. They were "going through the motions"—offering prayers that promised their best to God, and then substituting whatever was expedient.[1]

Was God going to fix this or not?

That's been the question of the week, hasn't it? After the NEW YORK POST headline in the aftermath of San Bernardino. GOD ISN'T FIXING THIS read the cover.

It featured the tweets of Republican leaders calling their constituents to pray after Wednesday's massacre, and the subtext of the headline was: prayer isn't enough; appeal to divine intervention isn't enough. And within hours another front in the national debate about gun violence was enjoined.

Wherever you find yourself in that debate, the phrase—GOD ISN'T FIXING THIS—has raised all kinds of legitimate questions about how prayer works, how God works, and where we should look for God at the close of 2015.

Is prayer an essentially passive activity—we send our work orders skyward and then wait for God's answer? Or does prayer a demand full participation in the outcome?

Is prayer our first order of defense? Or is it something we fall back on only after all other options have been exhausted? Is prayer a pointless appeal to an absentee God? Or is it the invisible glue which keeps our world from falling apart at the seams?

Much of the power of prayer, I believe, derives not from what it does to God but what it does to the person doing the praying!

[1] See Rolf Aaseng's Introduction to Malachi, in the *New Student Bible.* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990) p. 978.

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Prayer changes us on the inside, it locates God within and then ripples out from here into the world. Prayer, rather than being separated from action, holds petition and action together.

As Pope Francis put it, "You pray for the poor. Then you feed them. That's how prayer works."[2]

Will our prayers to God fix this? Put a stop to the epidemic of gun violence? Religious extremism? Terrorism?

What does putting our trust in God mean in these times in which we live?
Where are the signs that God is truly with us?

These are all ADVENT questions; questions for which there are no easy answers.

To the leaders of his day who no longer took God seriously, Malachi issued a warning.

The LORD is coming, he said, count on it! And his coming is going to touch you in ways that will leave you wondering what were we thinking when you longed for God to show up!

GOD STILL SEES SOMETHING PRECIOUS IN YOU, said Malachi, BUT THERE'S SOME HEAVY DUTY REFINING IN STORE BEFORE YOUR TRUE VALUE CAN SHINE THROUGH.

Four centuries later the word of the Lord came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness, and it is a word that says much the same thing. With the persona of a bulldozer John proclaims a baptism of repentance, of turning, of conversion, of doing an about face.

SNAKES AND VIPERS he calls them, yet they flock to him. WHY? Because they see something at work in him that reminds them of Malachi, of Isaiah, of Elijah. The uncompromising body language, the fire in his eyes, the truth in his speech.

IF GOD IS GOING TO FIX THINGS, THIS IS THE KIND OF GUY GOD'S GOING TO USE TO GET IT DONE, RIGHT?

The way Luke introduces John to us says something important about what we're going to find in his gospel.

> "In the fifteenth year of Emperor Tiberius," he begins, "when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitus, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene; during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." [Luke 3:1-2]

Why does Luke include all that detail, and what difference does it make?
Well, if we're going to take what Luke has to say seriously, then it makes a big difference.

Luke anchors his story of John and Jesus in real time and situates these events within a specific political context because he wants us to know this is not a fairytale that happened *"once upon a time."*

He connects the lives of John and Jesus, their parents and families, to the deep traditions of Israel, to remind us that John and Jesus were not flukes, that their appearances in Judea and Galilee were not aberrations but in fact had been promised by the prophets for centuries.

[2] http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithonthecouch/2015/12/a-response-to-prayer-shaming-what-good-is-prayer-anyway/?ref_widget=trending&ref_blog=goodletters&ref_post=vic-sizemore)

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When Luke mentions the Baptist in the same breath as Tiberius Caesar, he's helping us see that in this story unfolding on the edge of the wilderness God is making his move once more—not through means Caesar would own, but in a way that moves below the Empire's radar.

In the world in which we live, where news isn't news unless it's bad news**, GOOD NEWS** had better have its feet firmly anchored in real life or instead of being heard it will be summarily dismissed.

And the Good News today, as far as I can see, is that the one place we surely can count on the presence of God with us, is in the wilderness, which is where we're finding ourselves so much of the time.

Who is the God who meets us there?

When, at John's birth, the tongue of his father Zechariah—silent for 9 long months—is finally loosed, he uses his newfound voice to speak prophetically about where this story is heading.

> BY THE TENDER MERCY OF OUR GOD, says Zechariah (tender mercy!), THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH WILL BREAK UPON US, TO GIVE LIGHT TO THOSE WHO SIT IN DARKNESS AND IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH, TO GUIDE OUR FEET INTO THE WAY OF PEACE.

The God who reveals himself through John and in Jesus, the God who meets us in the wasteland of mass shootings, is, finally, a God of tender mercy.

Not a God who watches events unfold here from some vantage point light years away; nor a God for whom purity is more important that compassion; but a God, who comes from the very midst of us and meets our suffering with his own. Who goes the distance with us, even to the point of offering his life so that we can reclaim ours.

This God, who became one with us in Jesus, is not a fixit God, who provides simple instructions to complex questions and struggles that burden our world, but he is a God of hope.

- who shows us how to love our neighbor and live in community,
- who teaches us how make our prayers and our actions one.

Today he calls us once more to gather at his Table where we sink our teeth into this hope and are made won with it, as we are made one with him who is our light and our healing, our wholeness—Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.
God of time and history, we know that your tender compassion is meant for all your children and all creation in this whole broken down and battered world. Meet us today, in whatever wilderness we inhabit. Bring to us and to your whole creation, the light and peace of your presence. Bring to completion for us all the redemption for which we long, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.