

“The Voice of the Prophet: Change?”
Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79
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So how do you like the change so far? I decided to lead worship today without a robe. What do you think? Do you like the change? If I were to hazard a guess, I would say that the majority of ministers leading worship in America today are not wearing robes. So perhaps it is just that the Presbyterian church is behind the times in changing along with the rest of the Christian church. And isn't that strange? That we should be so reticent about change. Presbyterians are part of the Reformed family of churches, which means that we were founded upon change. Calvin and Knox and the early leaders of the Reformed movement were insistent upon change from the old ways of doing things reflected in the Catholic and Anglican churches of their day. It has been said that the rallying cry of Presbyterians is “Reformed and always being reformed.” Now I've never really heard Presbyterians rallying, but if we did, that would be our chant, reformed and always being reformed. Changed and always ready to be changed again. But is that really us? Do we like change? Or are we more like the old joke: how many Presbyterians does it take to change a lightbulb? Change!?! Whaddya mean change?!

Last week we heard the voice of the prophet Jeremiah—The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promises that I have made and righteousness and justice shall fill the land. And we talked about those days that are coming and that we long for days of peace and health and justice and mercy and forgiveness and all that God has promised. And the season of Advent looks to the future and sees that those days are coming. But today we hear from the prophet Malachi—the day of the Lord is coming, but why would you want that? Why would you want the day of the Lord to come—for he is like a refiner's fire, or fuller's soap. You know what a refiner's fire is—it heats up metal and melts away all the impurities. But what about fuller's soap, what is that? A fuller was someone who cleaned and thickened cloth (to make it full). The process involved cleaning, bleaching, wetting and beating the cloth fibers to a consistent and desirable condition. That doesn't sound easy or fun to me. The

promise of the prophets is that all the things God has promised will happen, but it will not be easy. It will be hard, because it requires change. I came out here today without my normal robe. A silly little change, and I admit that I like my robe. I don't want to change. But what if changing meant that more people felt that their preacher was less standoffish, that he was more like them, that they felt more comfortable, and therefore, making that one little change meant that more people came to worship to be together and hear God's word? Would we make that change? Many years ago, when I was serving a church in Kansas, a good friend of mine was the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Garden City, Kansas and early one weekday morning their church was set fire to by an arsonist. The church building was a total loss. Their church building had been a historic old church in the downtown section of Garden City. The church members rallied and started to plan to rebuild the church. But the question came up, should they rebuild in the same place and the same kind of building? Or should they change? They first decided that when they rebuilt they would have their main building all on one level rather than a church with many steps and this way it was more accessible to their older members and guests. But to do that they needed a larger space than they had occupied in the downtown area. After much discussion they decided that building out on the edge of town where there was plenty of room to spread out, plenty of parking, and room to expand, fit their mission and ministry better than rebuilding downtown the same type of historic structure they had before. They changed. And arsonists fire. Or a refiner's fire?

What would we do? We love this old building. But if it were no longer here, what would we do? So much of our identity is tied up in being the old church on the village square. Can we imagine anything different? But is that who we really are? The old church on the square?

To me, one of the most intriguing characters in the Advent-Christmas story is Zechariah. We don't hear a lot about him, and we don't often even read his story. But he was a priest who helped out in the Temple in Jerusalem. He was married to Elizabeth who we think was a cousin to Mary the mother of Jesus. They were both old and they had been unable to have children. One of the responsibilities of the

priest was to go into the Temple, into the inner sanctuary, into the Holy of Holies, behind the curtain where some people believed was the throne of God himself, and once a year to burn incense on the altar as a prayer offering for the sins of the people. Which priest did this was decided by casting lots among those priest who had never had that honor, so no priest did this more than once in a lifetime. This time it was Zechariah's turn. But as he went into the inner sanctuary, he saw an angel on the right hand side. And the angel told him that his life was about to change. He and Elizabeth would have a son and he would be a prophet and would prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah and that his name would be John. And Zechariah says, "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm old and so is my wife." Now, as far as I know, I've never seen an angel, especially this angel, Gabriel, the sentinel of God, archangel of the heavenly host. But I don't think I'd have the courage to question Gabriel. But Zechariah does—or maybe it's not courage, just amazement, or maybe it's fear that his life might change, maybe this is a refiner's fire, changing his life and Elizabeth's far more than they could have ever known. But the angel says, because you haven't believed me, you will be unable to speak until the child is born. And so he goes out of the Temple and is mute. But when the baby is born and all those gathered around want to name the child Zechariah after his father, Zechariah takes a tablet and writes, "His name is John." And then he is able to speak, and he speaks the song of praise that we read earlier. "And you child will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us to give light to those in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet in the way of peace."

That sounds like a good description of what the church should be about. Not the old church on the square, but a light in the darkness and one that gives knowledge of salvation and is a guide in the way of peace.

Is that who we are? Or is that who we can be? With a little refining? With a little refiner's fire? What would you be willing to give for that to happen? For us to be that? Or what would you be willing to

give up? The church has changed over the years, for many reasons, some good, others perhaps not so good. It used to be ok in for Christians in this country to own slaves or to be overtly racist. Most Christians now believe that the Kingdom of God is not like that and therefore the church should not be like that either. When I served a church in New Jersey as an intern, they had both men and women in leadership positions, because like most Presbyterians, they believed that God calls both women and men to serve in all leadership positions of the church. But some of the youth noticed that when it came to the very formal Christmas Eve service, that the ushers and communion servers wore coats with tails and white gloves and therefore, only men were asked to do this service. What did that say to all who visited that night? When push came to shove, were they just more comfortable having men do that job? Is that what the Kingdom looks like? One of the great ends of the Presbyterian Church, one of the foundational statements in our Book of Order is a list of what the church is about, and one of those six great purposes is the “exhibition of the Kingdom of heaven to the world.” Do we do that? When people come in here, for worship, when they come in here on a weekday, when they come in here for help at the food pantry, when they come in here for wassailing, or for Christmas Eve, do they ever say, “this is what the kingdom must look like.” Are they greeted so warmly, made to feel so welcome, made to know that they are so safe, that this is a foretaste of heaven? What can we do to make that happen? What would we be willing to give, or what would we give up, for the Kingdom of God to come? Maybe somethings might change. Is that ok? Maybe you might have to change. Maybe you'll have to give up some comfort, or a convenient prejudice, or a way of doing things. Or maybe you'll have to give more of yourself. More than what you've given before. Do more than you've done before. As my favorite quote from Frederick Buechner says, “My question is this: Are there in us, in you and me now, that recklessness of the loving heart, that wild courage, that crazy gladness in the face of darkness and death, that shuddering faithfulness even unto the end of the world, through which the new things can come to pass?”