

12/5/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Welcome to Alexanderwohl on this second Sunday of Advent. It hardly feels like Christmas is around the corner when we can enjoy the outdoors with just a light jacket.

Whether or not it feels like that time of year, it is good to be gathered together to worship God, and orient our desires and longings toward Christ who we wait for in this season of Advent.

The traditional theme of the second Sunday of Advent is *peace*. Pastor Lois will remind us that we need not just any peace, but peace with justice.

I look forward to learning more about through this service.

If you are intrigued by the display on the worship table, Tina Schrag has a description written in the bulletin with an explanation of the different items on the table.

Are there any announcements or opportunities this morning?

OPPORTUNITIES

Dr. Robyn Hartvickson reports that local hospitals are filling up and having to reschedule elective surgeries due to an increase in COVID cases. They are also beginning to see influenza cases. She reminds us to be vigilant in wearing masks in public, and when getting together in groups throughout the holidays to keep loved ones and each other safe. With this is a reminder that those 18 years and older are eligible to get their booster vaccination, and the first vaccination is available to anyone over age 5.

CALL TO WORSHIP

For our call to worship, I invite you to join me in this paraphrase of Zechariah's song that will appear on the screen.

Zechariah was the father of John the Baptist and sang this song when he regained this voice after a time of being mute. You can find this in Luke chapter 1.

You are invited to read the bold print.

*Blessed are you, Lord, the God of Israel,
you have come to your people
and set them free.*

***You have raised up for us a mighty Savior,
born of the house of your servant David.***

*Through your holy prophets,
you promised of old*

*to save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all who hate us,
to show mercy to our forebears,
and to remember your holy covenant.*

*This was the oath you swore
to Abraham and Sarah:
to set us free from the hands
of our enemies,
free to worship you without fear,
holy and righteous before you,
all the days of our life.*

*And you, child, shall be called
the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord
to prepare the way,
to give God's people knowledge
of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.*

*In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high
shall break upon us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness
and the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet
into the way of peace.*

INVOCATION PRAYER

God of Israel,

We invite you and call on your name, like faithful people of old, like our own grandparents and great-grandparents.

Prepare our hearts to hear the prophetic words of long ago and imagine what new things you are calling us to today if we would stop and listen.

Prepare our hearts to wait for the coming of Christ as if this Advent was the very first and the very last coming.

Amen

The Hein family will light our Advent candles.

MORNING PRAYER

Adapted from *Take our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayer book*

Before we begin our time of corporate prayer, I'll note that the procedures Rannie Schmidt was to have done on Friday were postponed until tomorrow, in contrast to what the prayer in the bulletin says.

[Linda Deasy passed away early Friday morning. Her daughter is here and a graveside service for her is being planned on Wednesday]

Lord, open our lips so that our mouths can proclaim your praise.

You are good to those who wait for you, to all who seek you.

Like the psalmist, our souls wait and
hope in your word,
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

God,
you know all our desires and longings,
you know our thoughts before we are fully aware of them.

You comfort us as a mother comforts her child.
You correct us as a father gently corrects.
We pray for ourselves and for those dear to us.

We pray for Marvin Voth as he adjusts to living at Bethesda. May he know your presence at constant feature of his life, even as life changes in other ways.

We pray for Rannie Schmidt as anticipates his procedures tomorrow. We pray for relief from anxiety, for successful procedures, and for recovery and relief from pain. We pray for Rannie and Meribeth both as they continue to adjust to living at Bethesda.

We pray for Connie Wiens as she heals from surgery that helped to decompress her vertebrae. We pray that this surgery will prove fruitful to give her back the ability to do the things she enjoys without debilitating pain.

We pray for Carson Sterk and Leah Booten as join their lives together in marriage this coming Saturday. We pray for them as they anticipate the big day, and as they experience the joy of becoming life partners. Give them wisdom as they form new routines in their life together.

We pray for the family of Linda Deasy who passed away peacefully Friday morning at Bethesda Home. We pray for this family as grieve and celebrate her long life through a graveside service this week.

You are a God of amazing promises.

We pray for our community and for our neighbors.

We pray for medical personnel and caretakers as Covid-19 continues and the flu season begins in earnest. We feel the anxiety of recent news about the omicron variant. Many are asking, "how long?" we will feel life upended by this virus.

Give hope and peace especially for those who struggle with anxiety or depression in this season. Give us all wisdom, courage, and resilience.

Your peace guards our hearts and minds. We pray for the church in all places, that we may know the freedom of life in the Spirit.

We pray that our witness to the light of the Gospel will join with a true witness of the church in all places, even while the battles within our culture continue to divide and betray motivations of dominance and power.

You cause righteousness and praise to spring up when we feel we are in a desert.
We pray for the world and for all who care for creation.

We are disheartened by much of the news that we hear. Help us keep sight of the work of your redeeming spirit.

Creation is your temple, and yet our way of life takes this gift for granted.

Replenish the land, the soil, and its biodiversity. Work through all who care deeply about caring for creation.

God of grace and glory,
you fling the stars into the heavens;
you see every sparrow fall.

You became one of us in Jesus.

Deepen our trust this mystery of your power shining through Jesus Christ.

Like Zechariah's vision of your just mercy,
give us imagination to join you in the hard and holy work of releasing peace in our community.

We pray as Jesus taught us:

Our father...

PRAYER OF CONFESSION...

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

God, we thank you that your arms are extended and your hands are open toward us.

You do not shut us out of your embrace, unless we shut ourselves out.

Refine our hearts so that we can learn to live also with open arms, even with the risks this means.

Receive the gifts we offer and lead us to hold what we have a bit less tightly.

Amen.

SERMON - SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Malachi 3:1-4

LOIS HARDER

God's Justice

Maybe you're like me and can't hear these words from Malachi spoken without also hearing (in your mind) the aria from Handel's Messiah in which these words are set to music. Of course these prophetic words, along with those of Isaiah are early in the score as it begins to tell the story of Jesus. The musical setting of these words can help us to hear and interpret some of the meaning as Handel skillfully paints pictures with the music. I've chosen a performance by Marietta Simpson singing with Robert Shaw and the Atlanta Symphony. It's from way back in 1987 and the resolution and quality of the video isn't great (it's a little fuzzy), but there are a couple of things about the way Ms. Simpson sings this that I think are particularly expressive. She captures the complexity of the prophet's message, with smooth, comforting phrases as she asks the questions, "Who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth?" (Of course, using the King's English.) And then, listen to her voice and watch the subtle changes in her face as the music begins to describe the refiner's fire.

One can almost feel the heat and imagine the intensity of that fire as she sings. The next piece in the Oratorio is the full choir continuing the story, singing verse 3, "he shall purify the sons of Levi so that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness".

So, what did these descendants of Levi do that was so egregious that this messenger Malachi was sent, bearing these words of judgment? Malachi is the Hebrew word for "my messenger".

The Levites were the tribe of priests, the folks who were at the center of the religious power of the Hebrew people in the Second Temple period after the exile. And they were not doing their job well. The Hebrews were living under the rule of the Persian empire – some had returned from the exile in Babylon and some had never left the land and so had intermarried and were becoming acculturated, mixing some of the social and religious beliefs of the dominant Persian culture with their own God-fearing, Yahweh-following beliefs – just tryin' to fit in and move up in the world.

It was the job of the Levites to maintain the focus on God, to remind and encourage the people to remember the covenant, to remember how God had called them to live. Remember those Hebrew words that Caleb showed us last week – *tsedaqah* and *mishpat*? We have to come back to them with today's text because these words are central to understanding the character of God and of the covenant call of God to the people.

Tsedaqah... (righteousness) being in right relationships that honor the image of God in others. And **mishpat...**(justice) actions one does to create right relationships. Those were the ideas that the priestly Levites were supposed to be keeping in front of the people, teaching them and helping them find ways to live out those ideas in real life.

But the Levites were also caught up in the power of the empire. The very people whose job it was to resist things like the seduction of military might, of monetary wealth and of nationalism had themselves, been seduced and corrupted by all of that! And so, the messenger had been sent with a reminder, a call to accountability, repentance and change – change that would lead the people back to remembering and embodying tsedaqah and mishpat.

The messenger goes on to say that this kind of change requires a process. It doesn't just happen quickly; it involves changing habits and long-held patterns, changing expectations, changing lifestyles and allegiances. It involves being humbled, being grateful, being self-less, relying on God's wisdom. And here, in Malachi, this process is described as one of purifying, refining. We sometimes think of this process as punishment, and it can certainly seem like punishment! After all, a refining fire is one that is so hot that it reduces the extraneous metals to liquid so that all that's left is the pure, precious metal like silver or gold. It sounds like an awful process to go through! Being reduced to the core. Likely not many of us would willingly choose it.

As I was thinking about this process of refining, I was trying to think of a modern-day person that might be an example of someone who has experienced some of this painful process of refining. And this is someone I thought of.

Any Shocker basketball fans here who can identify him? (Tyson Etienne) I've heard some things about him that made me think he might know something about this. When I went searching I found this article from 2019. The headline caught my attention: "Through fire and flames..." I learned that when he was 15 his best friend was shot and killed. He got caught in the line of fire of a drive-by shooting as he was walking home at 8:40 p.m. to make his 9:00 curfew. This was devastating to Etienne. As a high school student he had to leave his family and friends multiple times to continue chasing his dream of playing basketball. Many days he almost gave up, his grief and discouragement were overwhelming. But then one day, he realized that his life was a gift – his friend's life had been senselessly taken, no one knows why, but Tyson wakes up every morning and is grateful. He doesn't take that for granted. He's a devout Christian. He recalls his mother's faith being a building block for his own. And he said, "I've gone through a lot of storms – a lot of times I didn't know if I would make it through... God never left me alone." Although he doesn't make it to church regularly, he's disciplined about taking care of his spirit. He prays and meditates three times a day – it's a part of the routine of his life, just like practicing and working out to take care of his body. There's a whole lot of other basketball stuff in the article, but these are the nuggets I gleaned about a young man who's had some experience with refining fire, and has embraced it.

What better time than Advent – a time when we're waiting expectantly, longing for some light in the darkness, feeling the discouragement of on-going illness, divisiveness, uncertainty, mistrust – what better time to hear these words again from the messenger, and to embrace our own process of being

refined? That can seem scary! But maybe it helps a bit if we can remember that God's refining is one and the same work of bringing the kingdom – moving all of creation in the direction of tzedakah and mishpat.

In many ways we share a lot of similarities with Malachi's original audience – we want to be God's faithful people. We want God's covenant to be restored and honored. We want to see things made right in the world, as God intended. And yet... maybe we're not so sure about our part in any of that. Maybe it feels too difficult, too painful to go through the process. Letting go of our pride, relinquishing some of our possessions, loosening our grip on our tightly-held opinions...being whittled down to the most basic and essential part of our humanity – the piece that reflects the image and love of God. Those are pretty big changes and not many of us are fans of change. Hardly any of us are excited about big changes that are beyond our control! But God's work of fulfilling the covenant, bringing righteousness and justice, those are big changes that are way beyond our control. And even so, God invites us, individually and corporately, to participate, to use the gifts we've been given, to be disciplined as we wait, to embrace the refining fire.

There are a few questions suggested in the bulletin... I invite you to take just a couple of minutes to reflect quietly on those, or other questions you may have.

BENEDICTION – *VOICES TOGETHER #1059*

Go forth in peace, and be of good courage;
 hold fast to that which is good,
 rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.
And may the God
 who fills hungry with good things
 fill us with Christlike love
 and with a consuming hunger for justice
 in our land and in our world. Amen.