

“Offering”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for December 9th 2018 (2nd Sunday of Advent)
by Foster Freed

Malachi 3: 1-4

I think I ought to begin by noting that the verse that jumped out at me in this morning’s reading...

...the final verse in that four-verse reading from the prophet Malachi...

...I should begin by noting that I would not likely have paid a great deal of attention to that verse...

*Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem
will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old
and as in the former years...*

...I would not have been likely to pay any attention to that verse, had I not received an email from one of you, a couple of weeks earlier, a letter that included the rather pointed (and by no means wrong-headed) question:

Are we cannibals? Are we being cannibals when we present ourselves at the communion table, to receive the body and blood of our Lord? That’s a far from outlandish question...and it was the presence of that question in my psyche, that caused me to latch on to those words which promise the coming of a day when the *offering*...

...the sacrifice...offered in Judah and Jerusalem would once again be pleasing to the LORD. And so...I am wanting to wrestle with some of those themes: the themes of offering, of sacrifice, and of the significance of what we do here on a monthly basis, the significance of what other Christians do on a weekly or even daily basis, when receiving the bread and cup, the body and blood of the Lord Jesus. I want to wrestle with those themes...but first, I had better address a few preliminaries.

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The first and most basic preliminary concerns the four-chapter book of prophecy that bears the title Malachi. Hard to say whether that is the name of the person whose prophecies are recorded in the book, or whether the word *malachi*—a Hebrew word which means messenger—is simply a designation rather than a name. What **is** clear is that the book is appropriately placed at the very end of the Old Testament’s prophetic section, which makes it the final book in the Christian way of ordering the Old Testament. I say appropriately, because—from the perspective of the **New** Testament—it is hard to shake the impression that the “messenger” being promised at the start of Malachi’s third chapter as well as at the end of Malachi’s fourth chapter, is anyone other than John the Baptist. And yes: as we enter more deeply into the season

of Advent, John the Baptist...the stern, forbidding figure of John the Baptist...plays an increasingly central role to our Advent observance which—right up until the final Sunday of Advent—seems to be about as far from the Christmas spirit as you can possibly get! Indeed: as Malachi rightly asks...

...a question that fits John the Baptist but also fits Jesus, himself, at his most fiercely prophetic...

...as Malachi rightly asks:

*But who can endure the day of his coming,
and who can stand when he appears?*

Incidentally: if those words ring a bell, you have likely heard Handel's *Messiah* at some point in your life!

*But who can endure the day of his coming,
and who can stand when he appears?
For he is like a refiner's fire
and like fullers' soap.
He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver,
and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver,
and they will bring offerings
in righteousness to the Lord.*

The season of Advent, you see, consists of far more than waiting patiently for the sweet baby Jesus to appear; it is a season—if not of brimstone—then certainly a season of fire. That having been said!

Take due note of the fact that the understanding of God's fire espoused by Malachi—espoused by this stern Old Testament prophet—foresees God's fire as a cleansing, purifying fire. NOT as sadistic punishment. Yes, the Baptist we encounter at Advent is a fierce forerunner to our Lord. And yes: the prophetic Jesus we encounter throughout the year can be fierce in **his** judgement. Don't kid yourself on that score! But both the Lord and his forerunner seek our healing, NOT our destruction. Let's be clear on that much from the outset. Advent is a stern season. But it is NOT a season in which God becomes our enemy. Heaven forbid!

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Okay. So much for preliminaries. Here...here's what grabbed me when I read Malachi's promise, in light of the question I had been asked about communion: about our celebration of the Lord's Supper, and our recollection of the Supper as Christ's offering of his body and his blood. What grabbed me is the fact that Malachi offers a prophecy that didn't really come true...a prophecy which, at least on the surface, appears yet to be fulfilled. Writing in the aftermath of the destruction of Solomon's Temple at the hands of the Babylonians...

...writing, presumably, at a time when the Jews were back in Jerusalem but had yet to rebuild the Temple in anything like its previous grandeur, Malachi—who may well have himself been a Priest—promises a day when God will purify the **Priestly caste** and restore the glory of the offering made in the Temple by those Priests.

*He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver,
and he will purify the sons of Levi [the Priests]
and refine them like gold and silver,
and they will bring offerings
in righteousness to the Lord.
Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem
will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old
and as in the former years...*

And yes, I suppose there is a sense in which that came true: at any rate, a sense in which the Temple itself **was** restored to its grandeur, an event that took place—quite ironically—during the time in which Herod the Great held power over the Jews. And yet that restored Temple had a shelf life of less than 100 years. Within a few short decades of Christ's death, that Temple was destroyed...and has never been rebuilt. And since the Old Testament makes it abundantly clear that Jews are only permitted to offer sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple...and since those offerings have now ceased for nearly 2000 years, in what possible sense...

...in what **meaningful** sense...

...can it be claimed that subsequent history has vindicated Malachi's prophecy? There **is** no ongoing offering of Judah and Jerusalem! How can that **non-offering** be said to be pleasing to the LORD? Was Malachi simply wrong?

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I want to introduce you to a remarkable contemporary thinker...

...he died a few years ago...

...a French philosopher who spent most of his years teaching at American universities. His name was Rene Girard, and he has exerted a great deal of influence in many fields of thought, including—perhaps especially—Biblical and theological studies. That is quite ironic, because Girard did not start out with an interest in Bible, theology or the Church...although he subsequently became a Christian. His central interest was anthropology: in other words, the study of human beings. He was especially interested in our propensity for violence, noting especially the way in which the founding myths of so many cultures involve not only violence, but violence between siblings. For us in the West, perhaps the classic example involves the legend behind the founding of the city of Rome, in which twin brothers—Romulus and Remus—clash, leading eventually to the murder of Remus by Romulus who proceeds to establish the

city named after him. That was the sort of violence Girard sought to explore, finding instance upon instance upon instance of just such violence between siblings: violence that often marked the start to a new city, a new civilization such as the founding of Rome. But then...

...but then, Girard turned to the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. What he discovered there shocked him. Yes, Cain kills Abel...and Cain goes on to build the first city. To that extent, the pattern is the same. What Girard was not prepared to encounter, however, was the clear condemnation the Bible offers Cain. Far from being viewed as a hero, he is condemned as the first murderer...worse still, the one who slayed a brother. Girard took notice, and began his pilgrimage through scripture...

...a pilgrimage that most certainly included such episodes as that involving Jacob and Esau, a further pair of unhappy brothers...

...but also saw him pause at that most unsettling—but I believe most crucial—Old Testament episode, the one in which God first invites Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but then sees God withdraw that invitation at the last minute, substituting a ram. Just as the theme of violence between brothers is a universal theme, the sacrifice of children by their elders is no less universal. And here was a clear instance of a culture in which the theme was explicitly broached...and then powerfully condemned. Henceforth, in ancient Israel, the only sacrifice of flesh permitted was the sacrifice of animals: inside the Jerusalem Temple whose eventual purification Malachi appears to have promised. But maybe...maybe there is a different way in which to understand that promise. Is it possible...is it possible that the message God is really sending through Malachi isn't that the offering needs to be purified, but that the offering need not be at all? Is it possible...is it possible that in the killing of Christ...

...in the murder of Christ, we are given an image of what it is like to kill an innocent victim? An innocent brother? An innocent child? Someone whose death represents a travesty of justice? Someone whose death represents not merely one in the tiresome sequence of killing, revenge, and further killing? But someone whose death is offered so that the whole bloody thing can come to an end? So that the whole blood-drenched affair can end?

And you know: I have long been struck by the approach adopted by the New Testament book *Hebrews*, which repeats—almost *ad nauseum*—that Christ's sacrifice wasn't like the sacrifices offered by other priests but was a one-time affair. That language—language picked up by many traditional communion liturgies—always struck me as mere boasting: a way in which we Christians could say that “our guy” was better than “their guy”. But what if that's not the point; what if the point is that God wanted us to grasp the **finality** of what happened in Christ, so that we would no longer be condemned to repeat it over and over again. And yes, I realize: 2000 years down the road, human violence remains unchecked. We can debate—from here to eternity—whether the death of Christ actually accomplished what Girard claims, and what I have come to believe, that death (at least in part) sought to accomplish: stemming the tide of

human hatred and violence. We are a long way from the end of that journey...and I know that as well as you know it. And yet! And yet!

Here's what I also know!

On the evening before he was to be executed...gathered with those who would shortly abandon and betray him...Jesus, rather than distributing swords so that they could protect him...rather than brain-storming a plan by which they would violently be enabled to revenge his death...Jesus, instead, sat in the midst of that representative company of humans, and fed them. Gave them finest bread and said to them: **this** is my body...this **bread** is my body: so you can stop your fevered search for fresh victims on whom to feed! Then poured out for them a precious cup filled high with the juice-of-the-vine and said to them: **this** is my blood...this **wine** henceforth will be my blood: so you can stop your never-ending quest for others to sacrifice, for others to offer up. Not seeking vengeance with which to get even with those responsible for his death...but seeking, over-time to incorporate all of his enemies (including his fair-weather friends) into a company of those who feast in his presence, who seek not to kill, rather to live and to offer the gift of life to others in his name as broken bread...as shared cup.

And so I ask you! What does that make us when we come to this table? Cannibals? Repentant cannibals? Ex-cannibals? Or to borrow the language of the 12 step programme: recovering cannibals? I'll let you be the judge.

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A final thought.

I am reminded of something I said earlier...when I spoke of Malachi's promise of fire...and emphasized it as a **healing** fire. I am also reminded of something I said last week, when I noted that Advent is one of those seasons when it is ever so tempting for the preacher to preach fear. Fear: as in, you better watch and wait, or else! And given how distracted we all tend to become in the month of December, it's hard to shake the impression that we will—sooner or later—find ourselves on the receiving end of that “or else”! But here's the thing.

If we take seriously Malachi's promise that the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will one day be righteous...if we further recall that Judah and Jerusalem have not been in the position to present **any** offering—at least none of the prescribed sacrifices—for nearly two millennia...and if, finally, we view that in light of Christ's generous blessing, a blessing offered to those who abandoned, those who betrayed, those who condemned...

...well: it's hard to escape the impression that the God we await at Advent—that God whose salvation we seek to work out in fear and trembling—is the God who seeks not our fear but our love. A God who calls us, who goads us, into being our best selves...but who loves us even at our worst. A God whose approach ought to

quicken hearts and minds...but whose approach ought primarily to be heard as a glad thing, a joyous thing, a cause for celebration. How does our hymn put it?

*He comes, the prisoners to release
in Satan's bondage held,
the gates of brass before him burst,
the iron fetters yield.*

*He comes, the broken heart to bind,
the bleeding soul to cure,
and with the treasures of his grace
to bless the humble poor.*

And therefore rightly we sing...**rightly** we sing:

*Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
your welcome shall proclaim,
and heaven's eternal arches ring
with your beloved name.*

May it be so! In Christ! Thanks be to God!