

Malachi 3: 1-4  
Philippians 1:1-11  
Luke 3: 1-6  
Advent 2.

The Reverend Laura Palmer  
St. Martin-in-the-Fields  
December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024  
Year C

## The Manger of Your Heart

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer, Amen.

One of the gifts Advent has to teach us is that there are no shortcuts. We are reminded on this, the second Sunday in Advent, that the only way over is through—the wilderness.

And once again, when God acts, it's in an unexpected and preposterous way—through John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. We forget that John is the baby who leaped in his mother Elizabeth's womb when Mary arrived immediately after the annunciation to tell her she'd said "Yes" to the Angel Gabriel's preposterous request. But what seems preposterous to us, is not, in fact, to God.

While we think of John the Baptist as well, a bit crazy, hundreds, maybe thousands of followers resonated with his message of redemption through baptism and crowded the river's edge.

John the Baptist has been called the "Doberman pinscher of the Gospel" by theologian and author Barbara Brown Taylor, because he sinks his teeth into us, shakes our souls around, and will not let us go<sup>1</sup> that wild man -- eating locusts and wearing camel's hair, hollering about repentance and the Kingdom of God.

It's not surprising that we distance ourselves from his calls of repentance. Repentance, at least to us feels like hard work and tough love. Moral inventories are better for Lent than when we are decking the halls with boughs of holly and a few Fa la las.

Why bother? If we just keep checking off items on our to-do lists, Christmas Eve will be here with trumpets, angels, shepherds, stars, and a tiny vulnerable baby lying in a manger. All we have to do is rejoice in the hope Jesus brings into the

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown, "A Cure for Despair," *Journal for Preachers*, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1997, pp. 16-18

world yet again. Being awestruck and jubilant spectators beats repentance every single time.

In the New Testament, the Greek root of the word ‘repentance’ is more of an invitation; “to go beyond the mind you have”....which leads to acting and living differently.”<sup>2</sup>

With this comes the possibility of starting small—saving the moral inventories well-stocked with sin, shame and remorse for-- Lent. Try instead to carve out moments of silence this Advent in which you create a manger in your own heart where something new might be born.

Start small and leave the rest to God:

Remember it’s Santa who’s making a list and checking it twice, not God. God doesn’t care as much about what you’ve been but about who you’re going to BECOME. Isn’t that what baptism is all about? Welcome and becoming? You’re already in the kingdom of heaven as God’s beloved through the sacrament of baptism. Now what are you going to do about it?

In the spirit of the season, think of this as the gift you’re going to give yourself. Start in the wilderness of your own life-- most of us have plenty of acreage there. Where are the barren, forlorn places within?

More often than not, we change ourselves when we are uncomfortable. Wilderness is a place of transformation that we studiously avoid as author and theologian Debie Thomas explains:<sup>3</sup>

...wilderness is a place of vulnerability, risk, and powerlessness. In the wilderness, we have no safety net life is raw and unsettled, and our illusions of self-sufficiency shatter fast. To locate ourselves at the outskirts of security and power is to confess our neediness in the starkest terms.

In the wilderness, we have no choice but to wait and watch as if our lives depend on God showing up. Because they do. And it’s into *such* an environment — an environment so far removed from safety as to make

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<sup>2</sup> Kershner, Shannon J., “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is Near!” Fourth Presbyterian Church, Dec. 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016

<sup>3</sup> Thomas, Debi, *Journey with Jesus, A weekly webzine for the Global Church*, December 1st, 2019

safety laughable — that the word of God comes....something about the wilderness brings people to their knees.

It has said there's more spirituality in the recovery rooms in church basements than upstairs in the sanctuaries because those who are working one step at a time know how much they *need* God or their higher power. Their lives *depend* on it.

Christianity offers no shortcuts. There is no Easter without Good Friday and no Advent without John the Baptist who, in an admittedly strange package, offers us the gift of going deeper into our lives and faith. And isn't that why we're here? To grow in faith as both a community and as individuals?

On Wednesday of this past week, the late Shirley Chisholm was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor—one of the nation's highest awards—in a unanimous vote. Unanimous! You might remember Chisholm as the Congresswoman from Brooklyn who was the first African American woman to run for president in 1972. One of her opponents was George Wallace, the Alabama governor who was an unrepentant racist who campaigned on the slogan of “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”

The night before the Michigan primary, Wallace was shot in an assassination attempt and left permanently paralyzed from the waist down.

Shirley Chisholm, his opponent, went to visit him in the hospital— a man who hated everything she stood for. One of her young campaign aides objected — “*Why would you go visit a Racist and a Segregationist?*” —

Chisholm's answer was simple: “We never what effect we might have.”

Even Wallace asked her why she had come. “Aren't your supporters going to be angry that you're here?”

Chisholm said, “Yes, they are. But I wouldn't want what happened to you to happen to anyone.” (Several attempts had been made on Chisholm's life.)

Wallace's daughter who was in the hospital room for Chisholm's visit said in the room and said when her father heard those words, he “cried and cried.”

From that day on, George Wallace slowly began to change and ultimately completely disavowed his past—admitting he was wrong—he eventually apologized for his racist views and sought forgiveness.

As Chisholm said about her visit to Wallace’s hospital bedside, “You always have to be optimistic that people can change, and that *you* can change, and that one act of kindness may make all the difference in the world.”

And that young campaign aide who thought Chisholm was wrong to walk up the steps of the hospital? She is now the formidable Representative Barbara Lee from California who spoke in Congress last Wednesday on in honor of Chisholm.

“Mrs. C., thank you for being unbought and unbossed. Because of you, I am.”

We never know the impact a simple act can have. A manager. A baby. And we are because he was and is.

Amen