

Malachi 3: 1 – 4
Philippians 1: 3-11
Luke 3: 1-6
2 Advent, Yr C

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“Be God’s Messenger”

If last week’s Gospel was all about expectant waiting, something children of all ages find hard to do in Advent, then the readings for this second week of Advent are all about listening to the messenger so that we are all ready for the One Who is coming without confusing the messenger with the message and interpreting the message wisely.

Before e-mail, before text messaging, before anything electronic, people who wanted others far away to know something sent a messenger who carried the message, either printed or memorized. Pheidippides carried a message twenty-six miles to the leadership in Athens, by running the whole way, reputedly gave his one-line message, “we have won” and died on the spot. Thus, was born the first Marathon. Sometimes carrying a message at all can be dangerous. Sophocles claimed that some messengers were killed because the recipient of the message confused the content and the delivery person. And sometimes, evil, fear, hatred, and anger send their own messages. These are messages no one wants to hear and they can fill us with equal evil, fear, hatred, and anger in response. We all received yet another message in the mass killings in San Bernardino. We have received many similar messages. We still struggle to make sense of these terrifying messages. Some will understand them in very different ways. It is abundantly clear that these messages of violence are never godly messages; they come from some deep dark place in the human mind and soul; they are evil; they must not prevail. There are other messages that are godly and we are called to attend to those messages – messages of hope, love, inclusion, and peace.

Luke, of course, is introducing us to John the Baptist – who is, for Luke, the last and final messenger in a long line of many prophets and messengers sent to God’s chosen people. Luke wants us to understand that this person really existed and situates the story of John the Baptist in historical time by noting who the Roman Emperor was, who the governor of Judea was and so on. And, oddly enough, there is clear historical evidence that Luke was pretty correct in his naming of Emperors and governors, and high priests.

We know, from other scripture that John is related to Jesus and his own birth is a miracle with many connections to other famous births in the Bible. Moreover, the message of John is deeply connected to prophetic texts for John becomes the one crying out in the wilderness. John is understood to be the messenger foretold by Malachi, the one who will prepare the way. Malachi reminds us that the coming of the messenger is not without its costs and inherent dangers as this new way will require all of us to repent and change our ways. And there will be both acceptance and resistance to this call for dramatic and serious change.

We know that John's ministry does not end well. Not only do some of his followers desert him for Jesus, but also John's relentless attack on Herod and Herodias ends with his imprisonment and death. Did I mention that sometimes carrying a message can be dangerous? Most prophets never die in bed of old age. Most of our early saints died for their faith. Even in modern times, people die for their faith. The roster of martyrs seems endless. Sometimes carrying any message can be dangerous and carrying a radical, revolutionary message can be really dangerous.

This challenge of being a messenger and carrying a message that will turn over the existing order, a message that will inconvenience the powers that be, a message that is truly radical and completely revolutionary, is a profound and sobering challenge. Consider the figure, the saint, that we honor today, Nicolas, Bishop of Myra, Saint Nick, Santa Claus. In years past, we have enjoyed hearing from him directly. As it happens, this year he is off caring for others. Although many of us know him and his story, or at least some parts of his story, he, too, is really only a messenger; like John the Baptist, for there is One coming after him who is far greater than he. History tells us he was a bishop who cared about his people. His original act of charity was to provide dowries for poor girls who might otherwise have been sold into slavery or worse. Those quiet acts of charity have morphed over the centuries into the jolly old man of Clement Moore's poem. Now he is, for too many, merely a part of the consumerist engine we call the holiday season. Listen to what Saint Nick might say for himself.

Over the all centuries that I have been carrying my little message to all who would listen to me, I have felt like a voice crying in the wilderness sometimes. It seems like people get part of the message but not the whole message – perhaps I am too polite or kind. This season is not just about getting presents or going into debt or decorating one's house or having large and noisy parties. It is not about showing others and ourselves how successful or loving we are. It is about love overflowing so that everyone is connected and everyone is part of the harvest of righteousness – the harvest of God's love for all creation.

It is only when our love for each other and all of creation overflows that each valley will be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. That is what keeps me going each year as I travel the world trying to get people to remember that this season of Advent and Christmas is really about the greatest gift of all – the birth of a Son who will fulfill God's promise to us all – the promise that we are loved, we are God's children, and that we are not alone.

There are years when I truly do wish that all the rough ways would be made smooth. These past years have not been easy what with bad weather, the rising violence in the world, all that anger and hatred spewing out, and, frankly, at my age, it does not get any easier to do this work, you know. And being on the road so much, it is pretty lonely at times. I haven't had a vacation at this time of year in centuries. Honestly, my legs are killing me at the end of that long night and my back is no better. And spending a long cold night with nothing but reindeer for company is no picnic, either. Rudolf might be a great lead reindeer but he's not much of a conversationalist.

But, I am still committed to this work of being a messenger of God's love. I am honored to be that messenger and I invite everyone to join me in also being messengers of God's love. We may not all be thought jolly; few of us can slither down a chimney; we may not be able to care for very many people, but we can all do something to spread the Good News of God's love for all creation. Nothing about this message is new; others have proclaimed for centuries. The work is now ours; the banners, the hymns, and the prayers have been handed to us. Let the promise of God's love ring out across the whole world, let the promise of salvation be made known to all, and may the light of Christ Jesus guide us into the way of peace. This year, let us all join Saint Nicolas and be God's messengers, too. Amen.