

Uncertain hopes, a sure hope

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent

On this second Sunday of Advent, we have a messenger. The word "Malachi" is really the word "messenger" and in the third chapter of Malachi it talks about sending a messenger and in the fourth chapter the messenger is said to be Elijah, and then in the New Testament here comes John the Baptist who is understood to be Elijah come again.

What does he mean? John the Baptist appears in the texts for this Sunday and next Sunday and also in January. Why so much about John the Baptist? How does he compare with Jesus? What does this mean for Advent?

We use the color of blue for Advent, which means hope. What does a color mean?

If you read Moby Dick, you know there's a whole chapter in there about the color white. What does "white" mean? We sort of make up something specific and think: "That's it," but then we see that white can mean all kinds of things.

We say blue is hope, but we also say: "I was feeling blue." What do these things mean? And who is this John the Baptist, and who is Jesus and how does this work?

In order to do that we can go back to Genesis and how there was the first sin and then the first murder. At the end of Genesis 4:23-24, there's someone named Lamech who says (paraphrase): "Somebody wounded me so I killed him. Cain took vengeance seven times, and I'll take vengeance seventy-seven times." There is that way in which might is right, and people live by vengeance and vendettas.

It was a great improvement when, in the law of Moses, and also in the law of Hammurabi in the ancient Near East, and the law of Solon in ancient Greece, that it was said: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." There was a certain kind of equivalence in justice, to use that common phrase: "What goes around comes around." What you do is what you get. If you do good, you get rewards. If you do evil, you're punished. That's sort of the law of life.

It's ultimately built on the cycle of the seasons and nature and remarkably shown in Hinduism. Hinduism is a collective term for various gods and religions in India. 99% of them hold to the law of Karma. If you do good, you go up in the circle of life, and

if you do evil, you go down. Ultimately you hope to be so good that you escape the circle and reach bliss.

The same is true in Buddhism, which is a reform movement in Hinduism. It does have its atheistic side, but the biggest part of it is the same dynamic: Good is rewarded and evil is punished. That's found in Judaism, and for that matter in Islam, in its own way. What we have is a certain sense of justice. Do right and you will be rewarded; do evil, you will be punished.

And that's the message of John the Baptist. He's pretty fierce: "You brood of vipers!" (Luke 3:7). I like an older translation: "You generation of vipers!" You're a bunch of snakes. Don't pretend you are doing good while you're really doing evil. You will be punished. The wrath to come is there.

It goes then on to have the baptism of John and those who repent are restored. That's the way it was in the Old Testament. There was the idea that you can keep the law and you do better. When you failed, God in his mercy provided two ways to be restored. There were sacrifices and washings, which in Greek are called baptisms. We can talk about the baptism of John. There was a washing. In his mercy you could get back and be part of the people of God. Not that there is really an equivalence between that and Baptism into Christ.

Then as far as the end is concerned, at least for most of the Old Testament, you lived on in the tribe, in the people, which is very much like saying you live on in the family, and the family comes first.

And there was finally this hope that in the end God would restore Eden again, as he had created it in the beginning. But this was still based on justice, on God's wrath and mercy, his justice. That's the message of John the Baptist.

We then come to the New Testament, and there is the realization that it doesn't work.

You recall in Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death. . . ." If we're going to call on justice, we're all lost. We can't and we don't keep the law. Romans 5:20 says the law makes sin increase. And in 1 Cor 15:56: "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law." The law actually doesn't really help us. We end up obviously breaking the First Commandment all the time because we end up in spiritual pride. We fail.

That's why in these various texts about John the Baptist, Jesus then says about this: "He who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist"

(Matthew 11:11). John the Baptist was understood as the greatest of the prophets, greater than Elijah who was the greatest, and yet those who are least in the kingdom of heaven are greater than he.

Greater why? It is easily seen in the two different understandings of Baptism. It says here that John the Baptist baptized unto repentance, and of course this washing was repeated as needed, whether in conversion or before entering the temple or whatever. There were all kinds of washings, and repeated baptisms in the Old Testament.

But in the New Testament it says Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire, and it's not repeated. What's the difference? It's very important because this is the basis for our hope.

First, is, and it's spelled out very particularly in Romans 6:5, that we're baptized into Jesus, into his death. It says in Romans 6:5: "If we are united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

In another passage about John the Baptist, in the first chapter of John, John 1:29, it says John the Baptist points to Jesus and says: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." That is his eternal task, pointing to Jesus on the cross as the sacrifice who took away sin and death.

There is this enormous difference.

We have to talk about what it means to do something new. There are all kinds of newness. We also talk about doing something unique. And there's the Latin phrase *sui generis*.

When astronomers talk about the Big Bang, they often use the word "singularity." That is something for which there is no parallel. This is something which is different. All you can say is it's different.

What we have here in Jesus over against the Old Testament is something very significant, and that is: There is no cross in the Old Testament.

There is a book with the title: *The Cross in the Old Testament*. The author goes through the Old Testament and says: Job suffered. There's the suffering of Jeremiah in Lamentations, and there's the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, and so wherever you find suffering, that's the cross.

To be sure, that's a popular understanding of what the cross means, but it's totally false. Every time I have a kink in my neck, that's the cross. To reduce the cross to the idea of suffering is completely false. It's an ancient heresy.

What we have in the coming of Jesus and the cross is that the Holy One, the Creator of all, took on sin and death. We can't even begin to imagine or comprehend that. There is no parallel. It's very different, far better than anything. It is not simply that the Eden from the beginning is restored at the end. Rather, the Lord does something far more.

In our everyday conversations we talk about hope, by which we mean something good that may or may not happen. For example: We hope he changes his mind, but he may not. We hope she does this and not that. We say: "We hope . . ." or "hopefully," by which we mean something could go either way, who knows?

But in 1 Peter 1:3 it says: "We have a living hope." We have a sure hope. We can go to Romans 4 and talk about Abraham. It says in Romans 4:18: "Abraham hoped against hope." Here he and his wife were supposed to have an heir, and they hoped against hope. A sign of what God can do is that despite their old age, they had a son.

In Romans 4:17 Paul writes that he who can do that, who can make life out of death and who originally created something out of nothing, can surely do the greatest of all, and what is that? What is the greatest of all? The answer is in Romans 4:5: He can save the ungodly. That's the toughest of all, that the Holy One takes on sin and death.

Out of that, because of that, we have a sure hope. It is summed up in 2 Cor 1:10: "He delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again."

That's the message of the second Sunday in Advent. Amen