

The Season of Advent should scare the breath out of us! It should scare us witless. It should turn our legs to pudding, our knees to Jell-O, and our blood to ice water. Yes. Although we may associate Advent with emotions of anticipatory cheer, happy holiday carols, and the sounds of children laughing, we get a very different view from the cantankerous prophet Malachi, whose thunderous words are found in the last book of the Old Testament, a book that is actually named after the author who wrote it.

Our narrative this morning from Malachi, one of the traditional readings for this time of year, suggests that the initial emotion that's most appropriate and suitable for Advent is ... *terror*. Can you think of a time that Advent terrorized you? If not, you might remember when Advent terrorized your children -- like when you made them sit on Santa's lap at the mall, and they cried and screamed bloody murder.

Maybe you have found yourself terrorized by the price tags of the gifts featured on the Christmas lists of your family members. Perhaps you have felt terrified by the anti-Christian sentiment that often surfaces in the media at this time of the year. Maybe the sheer number of things needed to be crossed off your to do list before Christmas Eve arrives in just 19 days fills you with terror.

You think you're losing your mind. Your legs are like pudding, your knees are shaking, and your blood pressure is off the charts. But this is not the terror Malachi is talking about. He's talking about a heart-clutching fear, "I'm-going-to-die" type horror," a "This-can't-be-happening-to-me" kind of terror.

As we continue to count down the days to Christmas on our calendars it may help us to be reminded that the season of Advent is, in fact, not just a prelude to the celebration of Jesus' birth in a Bethlehem stable. Rather, it's a time to think more broadly about God's coming ("advent" after all means "coming") not only in the past, when Jesus was born, but also in the future, when he will come to us again.

And if we truly want to put things into perspective, as Disciples of Jesus living long after his first coming, it is his return that should concern us the most.

During Advent back in 1928, Pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached a sermon in Barcelona in which he spoke about the emotion for this season: "It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming so calmly," he said, "whereas previously people **trembled** at the day of God. ... We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love, and of God's coming at Christmas, that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us.

We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it, and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us!" Bonhoeffer wasn't making that up. Although his sermon didn't specifically mention Malachi, his words reflect the message the prophet brought.

In case you weren't aware, Malachi was the last of the Old Testament prophets. His ministry took place about 460 BCE, almost 100 years after the people of Judah had returned from exile in Babylon, and more than 50 years after the temple had been rebuilt in Jerusalem. Some of the people had hoped -- even expected -- that the completion of the Temple would launch a new era where Judah would return to her former glory and independence. But that had not happened, and the people had to deal with the fact that they would remain subjects of the Persian Empire, and that their land was essentially a backwater of that kingdom.

Thus, there was not a lot of incentive for a vibrant worship of God. According to chapters 1-2, even the priests had become careless and sloppy in their duties in the temple. And the attitude among many in the general population wasn't much better. Unfortunately, our reading for today was cut down a little too tightly,

but if we add the verse before our assigned reading, we can actually get a clearer picture.

In 2:17, Malachi tells the people that they have "wearied" the Lord with their words. Some of them even acted as though God considered evil to be good, or as though there was no justice in God's world. Biblical commentator Peter Craigie says that the people Malachi addresses "have become, by their attitudes and actions, functional atheists, not bothering to deny the existence of God, but destroying any link between God and justice, or between the Almighty and good and evil."

Our narrative this morning features a scene in which Malachi speaks words that come directly from the Lord. Although he himself is a messenger from God, he tells the people of another messenger to come, suddenly and without warning, who will be an advance man, a hype man, for God the Almighty. And that messenger's job will be to make the way ready for the Lord. That messenger will function like a refining fire that rids gold and silver of impurities, only his fire will purify the people.

He will also be like fullers' soap, which is nothing like today's laundry detergents. What Malachi is talking about is a corroding concoction containing potash, and lye. It will get things clean, but it's very hard on garments and clothing. But, of course, it's not garments this coming messenger intends to wash, but people. The smelting and scrubbing featured in the Prophet's message is, in effect, God's judgment for all. Everybody will be judged! And although Malachi doesn't speak about repentance, an important initiative that John the Baptist will later lift up when he is baptizing people in the wilderness, the implication is that those whom God will redeem are those who turn to the Lord. They will be saved, but it will be a rough redemption, a corrosive washing so to speak. For them, the fear is like that of a cancer patient who is facing a treatment regimen that will cure them,

but the regimen itself is so ruthless that it fills the person with worry. But in order to be healed, they know they must go through it.

Of course, we can and should apply this word from Malachi to ourselves. And whether we will be among those who perish, or those who will be redeemed, there is a reason for terror. Perhaps we should use Advent to let ourselves feel that. In the sermon I mentioned earlier, Bonhoeffer went on to say, "Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the unconditional love, incomparable kindness, and amazing mercy of our Creator. God comes into the very midst of evil, and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, with his limitless and abounding grace!"

But which group -- the perishing or the saved -- will we be in? Craigie notes that Malachi's "words are aimed in such a way as to puncture confidence: 'Who can endure the day of his coming?'" It can be a good thing to have our pride punctured if our confidence keeps us from making a serious commitment to God, or if it causes us to take our salvation for granted.

Random Surveys, or polls, continue to show that most Americans who believe in heaven also believe they are going there. Yet the percentage who think they have a spot reserved in eternity, is much larger than the percentage of people actively engaged in following Jesus. Advent calls us to examine our assumptions about our destiny and to look at our priorities.

Malachi's good news is that God takes the initiative and does the needed purifying, so we need not live constantly in terror. It doesn't hurt, however, to be reminded that God's grace is not cheap, and that redemption is a strong cure, worth going through because of the outcome, but not something to be taken lightly, or something to be assumed as our right or privilege.

Remember the famous painting that shows Jesus standing at a doorway in a garden, patiently knocking on the door? It's usually understood as picturing Jesus

asking admission into our hearts. But for many of us, our surrender to Christ came not because he gently asked permission to come into our lives. It was more like he kicked the door in and entered like an intruder, commandeering space and making it clear that he was taking over, at least for a while. Eventually we made a choice about whether or not to let him remain, but, initially, our defenses were overwhelmed.

That kind of roughness squares with Malachi's words about redemption. While a few of us may have found discipleship an easy path to walk, others of us had to be catapulted into it from self-centeredness, from sin-blindness, and from self-righteousness. And being catapulted or flung, although it may sound like fun to some, is not a comfortable experience.

It's clear in the New Testament that the gospel writers understood John the Baptist as the messenger about whom Malachi spoke. And we note that John's call in the Gospels, for repentance from sin, was not a soft and tender moment either. But that was the very first Advent. It's the Second Advent that's ahead of us. Jesus is coming again, and the messenger Malachi mentions may precede him. So, during this season, feel the fear! Let your pride be pierced. But then reaffirm your commitment to Christ and make it a top priority in your life to get to know the grace of walking with him as a faithful disciple. Amen.