

Advent Sermon Series: Advent: God's Gift of New Hope
Sermon Title: Historical Hope
Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6
Salem United Methodist Church; December 9, 2018
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While people are drinking egg nog and singing, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," we in the church are listening to prophets who are demanding us to prepare ourselves to welcome Jesus again. He is our hope throughout history. Jesus is our hope in the present, and he is our hope for all our tomorrows.

History is more than a subject we study in school. History is what we remember and/or document what has happened in the past. We share this history through stories, books, or documentaries. Have you ever thought about looking at history through a God lens to see what God was doing in the events of the past? What was God doing in different turning points of world history or even our national history? When we reflect on both our personal and collective histories, we discover that God was present and what God has done. How can we find hope as we look at history? If we say God is present in all things, then God is present in events as they unfold and become history. In fact our faith is based on historical events, such as the Exodus, King David, the Babylonian exile, and the prophets who called the people to turn back to God and told of one who was coming to save them. Our faith is connected to a place and time in Judea when an ordinary man named John cried out from the wilderness to get ready to be forgiven by God.

During the holidays many of us will be expecting guests. What do we do to get ready for them? We look at our house in a new way. Suddenly we see the lightbulb that burnt out a while back and replace it. We fix the leaking toilet or a door knob that wasn't working correctly. We give everything a good cleaning from washing windows to cleaning under and behind the furniture. We put clean sheets on the bed for our guests. We want to look and be at our best when receiving house guests. This is how we show hospitality. During Advent, we are expecting a very important guest, the Son of God. As we clean up our homes to welcome holiday guests, we are to look at our lives to see what needs to be mended, fixed, and/or cleaned as we prepare to welcome Jesus?

John is a historical messenger who called the people to clean up their mess. Even the spiritual leaders, the Levites, needed cleaning up. John tells them that the Lord is coming and asks, "Are you ready to receive him?" "Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can withstand his appearance?" Malachi knows that the people's hearts are not clean. They worshipped God half-heartedly. They have broken God's law. They have rebelled against God's love. They have not loved their neighbors, nor did they heed the cry of the needy. Sound familiar? Malachi states that God is coming to judge them. This judgment is like a fire that purifies silver and gold. Do you know how hot a fire has to be to melt down silver? Around 1700 degrees Fahrenheit. That's hot! But God's judgement does not burn us up to destroy us. The purpose of God's judgement is to restore us. The fire of God's love melts us so we can be molded back to our original state when God placed the image of God into us. Do you know how a silver smith knows when the silver has been purified? When she can see her reflection in the silver. So God knows we are purified when God can see the image of God in us reflected back at God! We all need this refining and we are always in the process of being refined by God.

Zechariah calls this refining process, deliverance and mercy. As he looks at his newborn son, he sees what he will become. His hope is in his son, John, which mean's God's gift. His son will tell the people who have broken their covenant with God that out of God's great compassion, God will purify them again, forgive them, and take them back, save them from their sins. God is the light of hope to those who are in darkness and this hope will guide us to peace.

Peace is not just the absence of conflict and strife. Peace is rooted in God. Peace comes as we pursue being right with God. Peace comes when we can honestly answer these questions from our heart and not just our minds. "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this

world, and repent of your sin? Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages nations, and races?" The kind of peace we receive is not rational. It comes from deep within and somewhere beyond our understanding. Our hope is based on the faith history that when people rejected God, worshiped half-heartedly, lived according to their own purpose and not according to God's, God comes to purify, restore, and save. God did this during the time of the prophets. God did this by sending his Son, Jesus, to restore and save us. Our hope is that God's gift to us is one that still purifies, restores, and saves. This gift of hope leads to a peace that goes beyond rational thought to a place within us and beyond our human understanding. The whole world can be in chaos, but because of Jesus we can reach deep within and be at peace.

Another historical moment is when Apostle Paul is sitting in a prison because of the message he preached about Jesus. In the midst of his suffering, he counts his blessings and writes how much he appreciates the partnership he has with the first church he started. He also writes to the church in Philippi that he prays for them. Here he is sitting in a dungy Roman cell more than likely in chains, praying that their love will grow richly, that they will know what really matters, and be sincere (pure) and blameless on the day Christ returns.

Pure and blameless, seems like a pipe dream. We know in our hearts that we are impure. A faithful follower of Jesus tried to be pure. She attended worship regularly, took time every morning for prayer and devotion. She strived to do what was just and right in her business. She strived to be loving to her family, friends, and neighbors. When she did something wrong, she asked for forgiveness and tried to make amends. Then one day a treasured item which sat on her desk disappeared. She searched her entire office for the item. It was nowhere to be found. She remembered that a co-worker had admired the item almost every time she came into the office. Could this co-worker's envy have turned into stealing? She mulled this question over and over in her head. She mentioned to co-workers how disappointed and saddened she was that this item had disappeared. She even suggested to a trusted few that she thought the individual who admired it may have taken it. Rumors and gossip exploded throughout the office. And the co-worker who was inadvertently blamed was beginning to feel ostracized. Then one morning as this faithful follower of Jesus was looking through a pile of papers, her beloved item was found. She was overcome with guilt, remorse, and shame. Her words accused an innocent person and made her suffer. She immediately went to the co-worker that she falsely accused and apologized as well as making it known to all her co-workers that the item had not been taken, but was lost on her desk. And then she asked God to forgive her, purify her heart so that she would not start rumors or gossip again. Being refined is difficult. On one hand we want to be pure and blameless. On the other hand we don't want to go through any process to be changed.

In 1741 George Frideric Handel wrote *The Messiah* so that hearts might be changed as they listened to the words from the prophets who pointed to the coming of the messiah. He wrote after it was performed that he felt that it entertained more than inspired the people to turn to God. His hope was to show people why we need a Messiah and how God gives us this gift of Hope in Jesus. We still need this hope today. Are you ready to receive him? What needs to be prepared to receive him? What needs to be purified or cleansed?

Prayer: Time and again, O God, have come to us. You have shown us where we need purifying and cleansing. Renew in us the commitment we made at our baptism, so that we may be a baptized and hope-filled people united in serving you. Let your kingdom come in us, and let us center our hope in your purpose. Come, Lord Jesus, come once again and be our new hope. Amen.

Resources: *Advent: The Gift of New Hope* by Christopher Webber; *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1* David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.; *The United Methodist Church Hymnal*

