

**“GOD’S MESSENGER”**  
***Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6***  
***Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor***

For most of us, day to day life is filled with challenges and issues and one problem after another. We may not spend a lot of time coping with problems the magnitude of global warming or world peace, but rest assured, we face enough challenging situations every day to cause us stress, anxiety and exhaustion. Most of us are not looking for any more problems and issues to tackle. We have quite enough on our plates already. I believe that church should be a place where we come to get help with our problems, not be asked to take on more problems. With tension between family members, issues at work, neighbors that are hard to get along with, and a host of other situations facing most of us, we don’t need to come to church and experience more conflict. We certainly don’t come to church to be judged, criticized or made to feel uncomfortable. Most of us just need a little encouragement to make it through the day. That’s what I need most of the time.

Some of the most popular preachers in America today, and certainly those with the largest following, are those who preach a Gospel of “God loves you just the way you are.” I heard a preacher on TV who began his sermon by saying, “You are good! You mean well. You want to have a happy life, but these negative naysayers keep dragging you down.” He then advised his audience to get up each morning, look in the mirror and say, “I will have a good day! I believe in me!” And although he didn’t mention God in his sermon (what on earth could God add to a sermon like that), there were 16,000 people in the congregation and millions more watching him on television. Many of them, I am sure, rushed to their nearest bookstore or went online to buy a copy of his latest book.

We have a deep yearning to hear that we are all right, that God loves us just the way we are. When I was in college, we read the book *I’m O.K., You’re O.K.* It was popular then, and the same ideas are popular today. I’m doing all right. I just need a little encouragement. Our “feel good” culture is reinforced by the media, where we are bombarded with advertisements for everything under the sun that will help enhance our egos and help us believe even more strongly in ourselves.

And so it comes as quite a jolt when Malachi, this strange prophet out of nowhere, comes with a message telling us that of all things, **we need to change!** Talk about being out of touch! Talk about not being relevant! As if that’s not enough, here comes John the Baptist, that weird dude who wears out of style clothes and eats insects and wild honey and is downright offensive in his sermons. “You bunch of snakes!” screams this raging lunatic, “Who told you to try to escape from hellfire? His ax is in his hand, he will cut you to the root! He’s going to separate the good seed from the trash and then cast the trash into the fire! I’m not worthy to tie his

shoelaces, he's so great! You'd better get washed up and get ready! Strip off those fine clothes and come down here into this muddy water and get baptized! You've been warned!"

Why on earth would anybody go hear a preacher like that when they can hear a sermon that makes you feel good about yourself? After all, we're not bad people. Who does John the Baptist think he is?

While most people tell us what we want to hear, John the Baptist has the courage to tell us what we need to hear. It's like the question, "Honey, do these jeans make me look fat?" The politically correct answer, we all know, is to say, "Why, no, sweetheart, they look nice on you." The John the Baptist answer is, "Actually, they look a little tight. You really should lose a few pounds." John the Baptist storms around the countryside telling the people, not what they want to hear, but what they need to hear. His message is simply this: **we need to change the way we are living our lives!** What? Aren't we good, Christian people? Haven't I already said most of us are doing the best we can? All we need is a little encouragement.

More than a century ago, Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard saw himself as a missionary to a non-Christian land that thought it was Christian. He saw himself as someone who was called to introduce Christianity to a culture where everyone thought they already knew what Christianity was all about. (Do you see any parallels between 19<sup>th</sup> Century Denmark and 21<sup>st</sup> Century United States of America?) The situation was that, whenever Christianity was mentioned, the typical Dane replied, "Oh, Christianity. Yes, yes. We know about that. This is a Christian country." Kierkegaard felt that the average Dane thought that Christianity was simply more information — information about the secret to a happier life, or information about the nature of God, or information about a technique that would lead to greater happiness. Being a Christian, Kierkegaard said, is not a matter of discovering the correct answer, and then repeating this answer back on a test. To do that is to cheat! The "answer" that Christianity supplies is not more information, but a person: Jesus Christ, who sometimes raises more questions than he answers! Jesus came, not to give us an exam about what we know, but to seek disciples, people who will follow where he leads.(1) There is a lot of talk in our day about spirituality, when this spirituality is simply a rather complex way of avoiding discipleship, avoiding following the way of Jesus.

Every baby is required by law to get a series of vaccinations. These injections are to stop the spread of disease. Most of us have probably gotten our flu shots this fall. The theory is that we are given a small amount of the disease in order to prevent us from getting the full-blown illness. When we get our vaccinations, we hopefully get enough of a dose to keep us from getting the real thing. I'm afraid that's what's happened with some of us in the area of religion. Some of us have received a vaccination, a small dose of Christianity, rather than a life-changing experience of faith. We have gotten just enough of Christianity to think we know what it is all about. And we can tell you what we like about the church and what we don't. But then along comes Malachi, and along comes John the Baptist, telling us that we've missed the point! And they have the audacity to tell us that we're not living as God intends. These guys don't know what they're talking about. Or do they?

Not only do Malachi and John tell us that we need to change, they tell us that **we can change**. The belief is prevalent in our culture today that people "are who they are," and will never change. I find the idea that people cannot change both alarming and life-destroying. What opportunity do those with a criminal record have to start a new life? Who is willing to take a

chance on them? Fundamental to the Christian faith is the belief that **we can change**, that our past can be forgiven and that we can start anew with a clean slate.

Do we believe that people can change? That is a key question for us as followers of Jesus and as disciples of the one who was willing to forgive, even as he was dying on the cross. A more basic question is this: do we believe that we can change, with God's help? A more fundamental question is this: **do we want to change?** And, are we willing to do what it takes in order to change? We live in a world that desires gain without pain, weight loss without sacrifice, knowledge without effort, power without responsibility, action without consequences. In short, we're not excited about changing our lives, cleaning up our act, getting our ducks in a row.

God says, "See, I am sending my messenger to your church!" "Hooray!" we say. But then we think, "Who can stand?" Malachi talks about a refiner's fire that will burn away all the impurities and imperfections. Who can take the heat? It will not be easy. But that's what God is calling us to do.

Please hear that neither Malachi nor John the Baptist is calling for our destruction. They are calling for the transformation of our lives. They are honest enough to tell us what we don't want to hear, but need to hear, that our world is not what God intends it to be and our lives are not what God desires them to be. Oh, we can make excuses. But the truth is, we have missed the mark. We have dabbled in Christianity rather than getting into it all the way. We have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. There are crooked areas in our lives that need to be straightened up, rough places that need to be made smooth, valleys to be filled, hills to be made low. That's the bad news. No, that's the good news! Because it is possible. **We can change, with God's help.**

If you've ever been to a concert of a big name artist, you know there is usually a warm-up act. Usually a group that is relatively unknown, just getting started, will perform before the star appears. Their job is to come on stage and get the crowd's energy level up and ready for the big-name performer to appear. The warm-up act heightens our anticipation and sense of expectation.

John the Baptist is the warm-up act for Jesus! He comes on the stage of first century Palestine, an unknown, with no credentials but his fiery oratory. He was a preacher's kid, but that didn't count for anything! What mattered was that he could hold a crowd. German theologian Karl Barth called John the Baptist "the model for all preaching,"(2) because John the Baptist didn't make himself the focus of his sermons. He always pointed to Jesus. I love the prayer that some preachers use when they begin their sermons, "Lord, hide me behind the cross." Let me point to the way, not get in the way.

John always points to Jesus. My question for us this morning is simply this, **do we?** Are we willing to tell people not what they want to hear, but what they need to hear? Do we believe that people can change? Do we believe that we can change? More important, are we willing to change, to allow God to do his work in our lives today so that we can be the people God wants us to be? Are we willing to have our world rocked, our tables overturned, our demons cast out, what's dead in us brought back to life? Are we willing to spend our lives following this one whose sermons were so offensive that the government tortured him to death in an attempt to shut him up? Do our lives point to Jesus? Are we willing to be **God's messengers** today?

*Prayer:* Dear God, as we hear the words of Malachi and John the Baptist, we realize that they are talking about us. Help us to see that people can change, that we can change. More important, let us allow you to come into our lives and change our hearts, so that we can become the people you intend us to be. This is our prayer, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Notes:

1. Willimon, William H. *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 37. No. 4., p. 44.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 43.