

Sunday, December 5, 2021 – Easter Hill United Methodist Church

**Bible Study – Malachi 3:1-4 & Luke 3:1-6
“The Fear of Home”**

Open with a word of prayer

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes) In pairs or groups of three, have each participant finish the sentence: “When I hear the word judgment, I envision...”

Malachi 3:1-4. Context. The book of Malachi concludes the Book of the Twelve (minor prophets) in the Hebrew Bible, and in the Christian Bible it comes at the very end of the Old Testament. Malachi literally means "my messenger," as in the opening verse of this week's reading. The issues raised by Malachi reflect the concerns of the Jewish community in the Persian period, most likely from around 450 BC: a concern for proper Temple sacrifice (unblemished offerings, full payment of tithes) and a condemnation of intermarriage with non-Jews – in addition to the familiar prophetic theme of justice for the marginalized. Malachi shares the perspective of several others from the Persian period and later (Isaiah, Zechariah, Joel, Daniel) that anticipates a great and terrible day when God would strike down the unrighteous and establish a new kingdom of justice. This week's lesson reflects that perspective and is one of the passages that finds its way into Handel's Messiah. Finally, Malachi is not an inappropriate lens through which to understand the religious expectations of Jesus' day.

Luke 3:1-6. Context. Luke, more than the other Gospel writers, is concerned with placing the central events of Christian history within the context of universal history: Jesus, as well as John the Baptist, are not just important to the people of Israel, but to all people. The Roman and Jewish rulers whom Luke mentions here point to a date in the late 20s AD. The Herod mentioned here is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great (the "King Herod" of the Christmas story who died in 4 BC). Luke, like the other Evangelists, understands John's ministry as a fulfillment of the words of Isaiah 40, that herald the coming of God's Messiah, the end of the captivity of the people of God, and the salvation of "all flesh." [A note about calendar dates: Anno Domini (“year of the Lord”) or AD only came to be used in the 6th century AD with the calendar created by Dionysius the Humble, a monk from what is now the Romanian city of Constanta, on the Black Sea who lived in Rome and worked at the papal court translating Greek sources into Latin. Prior to Dionysius’ attempt to “universalize” the calendar for the purpose of fixing the date of Easter, calendars were based on the year of the reign of the local ruler, as in the opening verse below; as a result, his calendar didn’t become popular, even in lands of the Latin church, until the 8th century. Dionysius had set himself quite a challenge, sifting through records that weren’t always accurate; and it’s rather remarkable that his date for the birth of Christ was only off, as we know now, by a few years, leaving us with the curious assertion that Jesus was likely born between 6 and 4 BC (= “Before Christ”) – a good reason to go with dating CE/BCE, Common Era/ Before the Common Era.]

Read Malachi 3:1-4 & Luke 3:1-6

What touches your heart, what do you hear in the scripture, what questions do you have, or what doesn’t make sense to you in the story?

Write down your thoughts or share your thoughts with the person or group you are with.

Read Malachi 3:1-4 & Luke 3:1-6 again.

Some reflection questions – Write down your thoughts or share your thoughts with the person or group you are with.

“Which words come to mind when you think of judgment? Why?”

- Consequences
- Fear
- Harsh
- Condemnation
- Other

What is your image of repentance?

- Person at the altar praying
 - Person weeping tears of regret
 - Person celebrating victory
 - Person offering large donation to a charity
 - Person bringing coffee and donuts to his or her coworkers
 - Other
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- Compare and contrast the words *refine* and *judge*. Which word seems more spiritual? Which seems more comforting? And why? How might they both be words of hope?
 - Why does Luke locate John’s preaching “in the wilderness”? What echoes of Israel’s story does this conjure up and what might it mean for how they see themselves currently
 - How does John’s ministry prepare the way for Jesus?
 - What does it look like to “prepare the way of the Lord”? How do we make the Lord’s path straight?
 - How does John’s message of “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” invite refinement of our goals, dreams, and desires?
 - Why would the refining of the social, economic, and political order have been received as a message of hope to those who felt as though they were still in political and spiritual exile?

Closing Reflection Question

How is this scripture calling you to change, to see, to be or what might it be calling you to do?

Prayer (10 minutes). Each person prays sharing their answer the following statements:

I ask God for....

I thank God for.....

Sending Forth (2 minutes). After all, have shared, pray the closing prayer. Ask for a volunteer to lead the group or read the following prayer in unison:

Compassionate God, as the calendar gets more crowded, help us to focus ever more on watching and waiting for the refinement you seek to do in us and through us. Help us to be a blessing to our family and friends as we strive to be people who embody forgiveness and repentance. **Amen.**

And now we pray The Lord's Prayer....

Our Father who art in Heaven
hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power
and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.