

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
December 9, 2012

“What Then Shall We Do?”

~Luke 3:10

Elie Wiesel, Jewish writer and Nobel Prize winner, often tells this childhood story. When he was a boy, his mother would greet him every day when he returned from school. Every day she would ask him the same question. She did not ask, what did you do today? or whom did you talk to today? or even what did you learn today? She would wonder instead: did you ask a good question today?

The prophet Malachi, which Kathy read for us, had many good questions for his day. How has God loved us? Has not one God created us? Where is the God of justice? How shall we return to God? The Book of Malachi poses 22 questions in just 55 verses, 4 concise chapters in total. God’s questions to the people are articulated; their responses to God are anticipated. Malachi’s question and answer style in its totality suggests prophetic deliverance as more of a prophet and people deliberation, edgy but candid, confrontational and engaging. The prophet and the people are now essentially partners in critical reflection on the nature of God and self-critical reflection on the conduct of Israel. To be sure, Malachi has some good questions for our day now. The very use of questions as a means of prophetic revelation counters an otherwise unthinking certitude of religious conviction. Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? asks Malachi in v. 2 And questions posed in today’s gospel from Luke we just heard: Who will prepare the way for repentance and forgiveness? What then shall we do? The texts and focus of Advent is meant to question our readiness, our willingness to recognize God in our midst. As people of faith, sure or skeptical, we are called to new integrity and uprightness, a turning from iniquity and a renewed reverence for God’s covenant of life and well-being. It is meant to be an opening, this holy season called Advent, (derived from Latin to mean coming) to the refining presence of God. I don’t know about you, but I could use some of that. I think we all could. And, in a weekend full of seasonal music here in Memorial Church, I learned something more about this Malachi text. It appears in one of the signature choral works of the Christmas season, George Frederic Handel’s

Messiah. In it, Charles Jennens, an English landowner, reclusive country gentleman and patron of the arts, assembled the texts for five of Handel's oratorios, *Messiah* being one of them. In *Messiah* he raises Malachi's faithful question about the nature of God's love. Jennens answered it with a series of powerful Scriptures. It demonstrates that music can sing our holy texts and proclaim good news. On this 2nd Sunday of Advent, following two evenings of Lessons and Carols, we indeed know that music can sing and proclaim our sacred narratives. And it can challenge as well. After the first presentation of *Messiah* in 1741, Handel wrote to a friend: "I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wished to make them better." Handel nonetheless challenges us to go beyond feeling good to doing good. At issue for us in this season of Advent are indeed many good questions about religious traditions and spiritual practice in our day: entertainment or edification? diversion or direction? amusement or awareness? The composer Handel answered this himself. Though by 1751 he was blind, until his death he conducted *Messiah* as an annual benefit for the Foundling Hospital in London, which served mostly widows and orphans of the clergy. The intent was not just to entertain; his hope was to make them just and better. We could surmise that his ears were open to the prophetic word of Malachi: "present offerings to God in righteousness."

Ready or not, here we are in the month of December – it is a month that is none other than "dense." Here also are so many of our students weighted under the stresses of end of quarter and finals week. Presenting offerings of any kind are reduced to hours spent in the library, research lab, Starbucks or on the laptop. And for some of us, in line at Macy's or the Apple Store.

'Same old same old' perhaps many of us are thinking and feeling. Nothing new here. Another Advent. Another Christmas bearing down. Another week of finals. Another quarter ending. Another fiscal cliff. Another another. Same old same old. And yet, the

verse with which our gospel text from Luke ended still seems striking, clear, and ends with a reflective question: “What then shall we do?”

We can try to remember and hold fast to the particularities of what we know of our faith, of our spiritual longing and seeking. That is, as they have always been, prophetic ones, speaking of the time to come, of things that are not yet, of places we have not been, of people we are becoming but have not yet become. None of us, no place, no time is good enough, not yet. God’s redemptive work is still unfinished – the salvation of all flesh has not yet been realized, as the gospel from Luke today declared. Nothing about this can be considered normal or traditional either. John the Baptist is the herald, the announcer of not only what God has done through Christ but also what God is still in the process of doing.

Likewise, this notion of repentance, such a loaded word but a central message in today’s gospel, is not about adopting a self-flagellating posture. Scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write in their book about Advent, called *The First Christmas*, that repentance means to “go beyond the mind that you have.” It asks us to consider the ways we have become captive to outmoded ways of thinking. How does this narrative of the incarnation, the embodiment of God in human form, in Jesus, confront the status quo?

How does God’s trajectory toward redemption, a manner of reclaiming, make a difference in the here and now? These questions are not simply mental exercises. They can impact the way we live in the meantime. Who we love and how; what we buy; how we spend our time. One writer has described the rule of St. Benedict, a book of precepts, its motto to pray and to work and in existence for 1500 years to help guide monks and women living in community, that illustrates this everyday decision-making. Benedict wrote that when the community welcomes a new novice, a beginner, they take the person’s street clothes and dress the newcomer in the novice’s robe. But

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they hang the person's clothes in an unlocked closet so that each morning the person has to make a decision anew: What identity will I put on? Who will I be? Whom will I serve? In my

mind, this kind of repentance, this turning toward can be life giving. The message of John today, and later of the one who is to come, is not solely for the down and out, though surely it is that. It is a message of light, of hope, of reclaiming, for anyone who sits in darkness. It is for those of us who hum in the checkout lines or in the dining hall as well as for those who moan bah humbug. It is for those who have managed to cross everything off the list, turned in the last paper or completed the project, and those who are trying to make it through this holiday season without steady work or crushed under the overwhelming tasks on the syllabus or to do list with the clock ticking.

I have to admit, preaching again in Advent, this being my 12th one here in Memorial Church, is never easy. Why bother with Advent – let's get to Christmas shall we? It's a mad rush this time of year and for some it is a deepening gloom because they can't shop or party like they think they ought. And among the distinctions this year are the hopes and fears generated by a Presidential election. Whether you are one deeply confident about the possibilities of political power or increasingly fearful about the future, I am fully aware that this is where we are in these particular historical moments. Will there be an outbreak of bipartisanship so Congress can work together on our most pressing problems? Or will the dreary status quo of perpetuating gridlock remain? Regardless, I doubt that any of us, whether or not our candidate was elected, realistically expect that the harsh winds of high unemployment and frustrating underemployment will abate any

time soon or that the threatening thunder of debt ravaged European countries will suddenly stop rumbling. As it has now for some time, economic uncertainty spreads an uncomfortable chill through these Sundays of Advent and the Christmas season. Needless to say, I am also fully aware that here today is also a collection of people who feel anxious and troubled as well as people who feel confident and grateful. While it

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may be the same old same old in some ways, there is still both the ancient and ever new message shrouded in this season. What then shall we do?

This message of repentance in Luke's gospel and presence of penetrating questions from the prophet Malachi is not lost on us. It is, I contend, a gracious if not urgent opportunity for us to reframe how we think and feel about God, about life, about ourselves. How we might be involved in looking at the structures and the systems and the people of the world in and around us in new and different ways. The invitation in this gospel is to try and turn from habits of the mind and heart that push God, the holy out of our conscious awareness. If, in the course of our daily lives we think of God at all, it is as distant and disinterested observers.

In times such as these, I like to seek out the wisdom of people who have insights that are palpably real and refreshingly honest. And humor helps. This Advent and Christmas season, I'm digesting the latest book of one of my favorite writers. Not a theologian, though I suppose she really could be. Not an academic, though she is smarter than most. Not a dead saint, though she is very much an alive, precocious saint. It is Anne Lamott, author of *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. It is these three prayers she contends – asking for assistance, appreciating the good we witness, and feeling awe at the world – that get us through the day and show us the way forward.

Reflecting for Advent 2012, she kept thinking of Brother Lawrence, another monk like St. Benedict who spent time in monastic community and who also wrote the timeless classic *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Lamott writes: Brother Lawrence struggled with his faith until one day he saw the barren trees in winter as an epiphany: that God sees us and the trees, with no leaves, nothing to bedazzle, no fruit on our branches to earn our keep, as being gorgeous, cherished, latent with an explosion of life and beauty and fruit that will magically come in the spring. Lawrence worked in the monastery's

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kitchen, alternately scouring grime off pans and dropping to his knees in gratitude for God's company. This is so not me most of the time, she laments, when I am left to my own devices.

Lamott illustrates with Exhibit A of Annie left to her own devices: I go to CVS for a flu shot and am completely dissed by the pharmacy clerk who appears to be about 15. She is mean and scary, plus Frosty the Snowman is blasting through the store. While I stand there being alternately ignored and studied with teenage contempt, Holly Jolly Christmas comes on. At some point, just as I begin to develop a facial tic and tremors, I get my shot and rush outside and almost crash into a Salvation Army bell ringer. I get to my car where I sit in a swivel of overwhelm, hating Christmas and December. If I were God's West Coast rep, I would cancel December, no aluminum trees, no Almond Roca, no Salvation Army bell ringers...

But then a tiny memory comes back. I believe in prayer. That sort of slipped my mind. I live by the buoyancy and second winds of grace, of goodness, of divine love and it is Advent, when we celebrate in the dark and cold that the light is returning. When we just remember to keep an eye out for it –to wake back up. So I hang my head and say I need help. I suddenly remember not who I am – the princess – but whose I am. I felt like you do when grace tugs on your sleeve as if you are being spritzed by a plant mister. And I got happy and broke free of my own best thinking, went back to the bell ringer, shoved a dollar in the bucket and said thank you for the work you are doing. And I got the miracle – Lourdes there at CVS. I got my sense of humor back which is how I can usually tell that I've been touched by grace and that gave me my myself back. I lightened right up.

This, Lamott says, is the time of year when in every wisdom tradition and religion, we ask will the light really come again this year? Will there really be spring? Left to my own devices, I think probably not, or 50-50; but faith tells me that no matter how sick and in trouble the trees look, things will be okay, that we are all connected...that if we

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light a few candles, scatter some seeds...try to help as we can, stick close to each other as we prepare for the end of despair there will be enough light, buds on the trees, hope. And hope always catches us by surprise.

People like Anne Lamott remind me that while limited and inadequate, the language by which we feebly try to address our own penetrating questions or those in the narratives of our texts, language cannot be abstract. There always and evermore shall be the reality and mystery of God's proximity and transforming power wherever one is and whatever the time. And it may be unpredictable as to how or through whom it comes.

In this holy season, may we each remember, not through certitude, but with questions, that hope opens something in the human heart. It also reveals a landscape beyond us into which we can live and move and have our being. May God accept our tentative offerings of hope and strengthen our practice of hope amidst the questions we live with each and every day. May our vision be sharpened so that we may see signs of goodness at work in the world and be, as prophets and messengers of old were, partners in hope, luminaries of our time, refiners of grace and exemplars of humility.

Amen.