



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

“Cleaning House”

Malachi 3: 1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ²But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

*For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; ³he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. * ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.*

Luke 3: 1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler* of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler* of Abilene, ²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,*

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

*⁵Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;*

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’

The Christmas story was one of the first Bible stories I remember from my youth. I was a 9 or 10 year old, sitting in Second Reformed Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey, listening as the minister read it to us in the language of King James. Luke told the Christmas story the best. He wrote his Christmas story so that I and other kids like me would listen to it. I particularly liked the detail with which he wrote. He referred to such interesting names of places and people: *“It came to pass that in those days a decree went forth from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.”* I had no idea who Augustus was, it sounded like the month that came after July, and what was a decree? But I loved to listen to those words. I loved the sound of the words. They sparked my imagination.

I also remember the first time I heard the opening lines of the third chapter of Luke, the story of John the Baptist: a traditional Advent text. Just the names would capture my attention: Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, tetrarch, Ituraea, Trachonitus and Lysanias.

I would sit in our family pew, the 3rd row from the back, and just listen to those amazing names and play with them in my mind. Trachonitus.. it sounded like some type of illness that would afflict young children. I could imagine the physician telling my mother, “I am sorry Mrs. Eelman, Brent has a bad case of *Trachonitus*... but if he takes two *tetrarchs* each day he will not develop *Ituraea*.” I would amuse myself with these little games and they managed to get me through the hours of worship that stood between me and magic of Christmas morning.

Then there were the Prophets: Today's prophet, Malachi, was not spared my wild imaginings. I was convinced that he was not a Hebrew prophet. He was Italian, and his name was pronounced, Mallachi. Anthony Mallachi was his name, and he was a soap salesman: Fuller's Soap. (It was right there in the Bible! Fuller's Soap!)

God, of course, had the last laugh. God knew that someday, I would stand in front of a group of people and preach from those two texts that I skewered in my imagination 55 years ago. It was fun to play with the details and the names from the Advent and Christmas story, but those names and details are important to our understanding of the miracle of Christmas. I would like to take a few minutes and look at the characters and names and why Luke went into such detail in telling Christmas story. Let us set the characters on Luke's stage:

Caesar Augustus was a brilliant individual, schooled well in the arts and philosophy, but alas he fathered no male child. That void was filled by Tiberius. He was the stepson of Augustus, and was not well accepted by the other Roman leaders. He was not loved, nor was he respected.

Pilate was a career bureaucrat and civil servant. He rose through the ranks to become the procurator of Judea in the year 26. He, too, was not known for his diplomacy and seemed to develop a knack for antagonizing his Jewish subjects. He was feared and despised because he kept his hold on the people by unleashing the brutal Roman army on them.

Herod was the third character in this drama. He was unbalanced and dangerous. He was designated the King of the Jews, although he was not Jewish. He rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, but also spent as much or more money building pagan temples throughout the region. He was paranoid and his fears led him to murder all whom he feared would usurp his power.

Then there are the two priests: *Annas* and *Caiaphas*. They were not known for the spirituality or religious devotion, but rather with their desire to maintain their own power and authority. Neither was known for their religious leadership.

These were the characters in Luke's Advent drama announcing the coming of the Messiah. They were incompetent and brutal. It was not a pleasant time to be alive. There was a lot that needed to be changed, to be fixed. Luke was telling us that when Jesus was born and when his ministry was announced by John the Baptist, things were pretty much of a mess. The religious authorities were corrupt; the politicians were incompetent, paranoid and out of touch with reality; and the ones that had competence were not respected. The world was ripe for change. **A house cleaning was needed.**

The prophet Malachi spoke of a messenger who would come and announce the day of the Lord. In particular, this messenger of God would announce a powerful change particularly to the religious establishment. Listen to the words of the prophet: "*He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.*" Fire was used to purify silver and gold from the ore. The different metals melted at different temperatures and thus, could be separated and purified by using intense heat. Fuller's soap was not a brand name. It was an alkali-like substance that was derived from soda ash. It was not used to clean the body, but was used to clean wool and other objects that could withstand its harshness. This messenger would come and "clean house"; purifying, cleaning, scrubbing and sanitizing. This messenger of the Lord would clean the house of history itself! It was God's intention to redeem history, to cleanse it from evil, incompetence and spiritual vapidness.

Today we are here in this room, singing carols and reading stories, not because Phillip was Tetrarch of Trachonitus, nor because Augustus ruled the ancient world. We are here because of the child announced by that messenger, Jesus, was born in the midst of all this. History, in the hands of God, was purified. God, indeed, cleaned house!

Think about it. No other names ultimately matter: Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Augustus, Caiaphas.... They don't have songs or carols about them. They don't have the power to change lives today. We are here because of a child born among them, Jesus, the Messiah.

Our response? We should have hope. There are days when I read the newspaper, filled with its stories of violence, terrorism, intolerance, hate, and the spiritual emptiness of our day; there are times when I just shake my head in wonder and worry... and you must also... But we need to remember the message of the prophets, and the story that Luke told. Into **this world** a child was born, and that child is the foundation of all that ultimately matters.

The house of history with all its figures, tyrants and fools has been cleansed and our age too will be purified by the flames of grace and forgiveness.

This is the hope of this season and the good news of the Gospel. "He will come," says the Lord of Hosts. Amen.