

Expect a Harsh Cleaning

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Malachi 3:1-4

“But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”

2nd Sunday of Advent

Movement 1 – The Empty Rituals of Society

Have you ever had a moment in your life when you find yourself just going through the motions? You are acting reflexively, without thinking. Your body knows where it is going, but your mind has turned off, and you are following a routine. You are going through the motions.

It is like Kevin Spacey’s character in the beginning of the movie *American Beauty*. This is a man who has a lifeless job, whose marriage has lost all flame and spark, and who has just become a necessary part of the family – like the sofa. He wakes up, he goes through his morning rituals, yet the way he walks, talks, and lives gives one the impression that below the surface his mind is already dead. He is just going through the motions.

There are many times when our mind shuts down and our body just knows what to do. When we drive a car, we aren’t really thinking about turning the key, stepping on the gas, shifting, hitting the brake, and everything else that we have to do to operate that machine. We don’t think about it, we just do it. We are just going through the motions. When we tie our shoes, or when we play sports, we stop thinking and just go through the motions. A goal of mine is to be able to know the remote control of a TV so well, that when I want to channel surf, I don’t have to think about what buttons to push, I don’t even have to look at the remote. I can just go through the motions, and gaze and the constant changing picture in front of me. I am just going through the motions.

Malachi was written to a people who some argue were going through the motions with their faith. They were going to the temple to worship, they were doing all of the right and proper things for worship, yet there was something missing. They were mouthing the words, but something deeper was missing. They were going through the motions, but their hearts were not in their worship. Like robots, they would say the prayers, they would sing the songs, yet the emotions were surface at best. Like the workers in the movie *Antz*, they would go where they were told to go, do what they were told to do, and not ask any questions. There is even a scene in that movie when the worker ants are at a bar and dancing. The dance is in lock-step motion, done without any kind of emotion, passion or feeling. One could imagine the Israelites worshipping in the same way, without any feeling, passion, or emotion. In their worship, they were just going through the motions.

I wish I could say we do not worship in such a way. I wish I could say that we go beyond the motions to the emotional, the affective, and the spiritual content of the liturgy in our worship. I wish I could say that we never just mouth the words, that we never just move through the different parts of worship without thinking about it, but I have been to many churches and I have worshiped with many people and we all have gone through the motions. I have seen Catholics say the creed with a glazed look in their eyes. I have seen Presbyterians read their catechism with emotionless tones to their voices. I have heard Methodists declare their faith with the same tone as stating your name for a court of law, and I have heard Baptists read the scriptures with the same tenor and enthusiasm as one would read a phone book. Many times I have fallen into a daze while saying the Lord’s prayer, not thinking about what I am saying, but only saying what my lips know what to say. Many times I have found myself singing the old familiar hymns without paying any heed to the words. Many times I have just gone through the motions. We all have fallen to this place of going through the motions in worship. We all have allowed ourselves, in our comfort with the worship, to merely follow what we have always done in our worship setting. Our mind goes elsewhere – to the afternoon football game, to the shopping we still have to do, to the church work that needs to be done, and our body turns to autopilot. Anthony Robbins

once said, “If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always gotten.” Are we satisfied with what we’ve gotten? Are we complacent with the status quo? Do we want to continue to just go through the motions, or is there something more that pulls us in our worship and in our lives? Do you want to go through the motions?

Movement 2 – The Sanitized God of the Empty Rituals

Sometimes we go through the motions to keep us safe. It may be that to invest ourselves would be too risky. It may be that stopping and thinking would cause us to realize a truth that might be too much to handle. The Israelites were going through the motions, worshipping God, and trying to stay true to the covenant. Yet if you were to stop one after worship, and ask him what he thought about God, he may shrug his shoulders and mutter something about God’s noticeable absence from their land. Another may point at the rich, people who live lives of lies, people who overtly disrespect God, people who break the commandments of Moses on a daily basis without any remorse, and seem to be blessed. Yet another may point to a tired old man sitting on the temple steps, and tell you how he lost his family in the Babylonian exile, how his land was stolen by the rich, how he struggled to find work, but could not find any, and how he still went to the temple every day and did all he could to stay righteous in the path of the Lord. Someone may point to that tired old man, and then to the rich man who has turned his back on God, and say, “where is the God of justice? Where is the God of righteousness? Our God is not here, and we participate in empty rituals.” By stopping to talk to the Israelites, you scratch the surface and find a deeper wound which is covered by the mechanical motions of an empty worship.

A mechanical worship offers a sanitized God, but a safe God. With a sanitized God, the Israelites could make excuses for injustice. With a sanitized God, the Israelites could put away their anger and their distress and the inequalities of society, and not hold God to blame. With a sanitized God, the Israelites could safely worship and not fear thinking or feeling any hurt, or anger. They go through the motions to keep themselves safe.

It is like editing an “R” rated movie for Television. The movie becomes sanitized, and becomes safe. In the same way, the Israelites have sanitized their God, and have made their God safe.

In the story, *Harrison Bergeron*, by Kurt Vonnegut, human culture has finally reached the place where everyone is equal. Yet equality is not reached through passing laws, or providing opportunities, but by making everyone equal mentally and physically. The strong have to hold weights which will slow them down. The smart are given a kind of mental damper that slows down their thoughts. The beautiful have to wear makeup to deform their appearance. All are made equal by holding everyone down. What is lost is the danger of difference, the danger of competition, and the danger of human flourishing. People were held down to keep them safe and manageable.

In the same way the Israelites were holding down God in their relationship and in their worship to keep God safe and manageable. They would say prayers, but not hold them close to their heart. They would offer gifts, but not their lives. Worship was safe.

I wonder if we do the same thing with God today. I wonder if we sanitize and surround God with constructs and ideals so that we will not have to really face the unknowing and uncertainty that comes with faith. We read the Bible in a way that leaves out any ambiguity. We discuss God with a theology that is restricting. We worship God in a way that is controlled. We sanitize God and keep God safe so we will not have to ask the difficult questions that inevitably will plague our consciousness. These are the questions that the rabbi Harold Kushner mentions in his book, *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People*. We would want to know why the righteous suffer and why the unrighteous flourish. We would want to know why hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and tornadoes take the lives of so many people. We would want to know why a child would contract cancer. We would want to know why people in power think more of themselves than of others. We

would want to be assured that we are forgiven and we are saved, even though the doubt and the questions would always linger. We would enter into these difficult questions and it would not be pretty.

In the first season of the show, *Six Feet Under* the family of undertakers is attending the funeral of their father. As the body is set to be lowered into the ground, the mother takes a shaker and sprinkles dirt onto the coffin. The oldest son then throws the sprinkler on the ground disgusted with the sanitized nature of the grief, grabs dirt in his hand and tosses it on the coffin. As he does so he declares that grief is dirty and difficult, not clean and neat. Honest worship can be the same, yet we hold back in our rituals and our prayers.

So we sanitize God. Especially in this holiday season, it is easy to see how God is sanitized. We assume that all churches will offer cheer for the season. We spend a little more time with children, expecting the glowing and cooing Christ Child. We tell God that this is meant to be a joyful season that this is meant to be a celebrating season, and expect God to comply. Our hymns carry a hue of carols, our dress in not Royal Blue, but celebratory green and red. We sanitize God, because in this time of year we do not want to ask the difficult questions, we do not want to face the injustice of the world. We just want to feel the happy cheer of Christmas. So we go through the motions of worship. We sing the songs and pray the prayers, so that we will be kept complacent and we will be kept safe.

Movement 3 – The Jarring Words of the Prophet

Yet the prophet Malachi calls us to be alert! The prophet calls us to awaken from our liturgical slumber, to awaken from our lazy services, and to embrace the person and the power of the word which God has for us. The prophet says to the Israelites to be ready for a messenger, to be ready for someone who will make the presence of the Lord known. It will be a time when your questions cannot be avoided. It will be a time when your fears cannot be avoided. It will be a time when the glory of the Lord will not be avoided. Malachi is not just scolding the people, but speaking to their deeper questions, their deeper concerns and worries. He hears the questions about justice and righteousness and mercy. He hears the questions of God's presence and tells the people that God will be known, that God's justice will be known and we will be made holy once again. It is a word of hope and a word of warning.

Malachi speaks to us as well, calling us to embrace our questions, our concerns and our doubts. Malachi calls us to be ready for the messenger with all of our concerns and questions. Don't turn to the messenger with a sanitized understanding of God, but with your real, your gritty, your honest understanding of God. Other prophets of the world call us to dress up our religion, to make it pretty and nice for all to see. Malachi calls us to be ready with our religion in an honest way.

He is the one voice going against the flow of the culture. He is that one nut cake who is always warning others. He is that one individual who is always holding the word of caution. Like the one person at the Christmas party who insists on reminding everyone else about the fat content in the cake, and the amount of cholesterol in the cookies. Like the one prophet who goes against 400 in 1 Kings 22, warning that war would be a disaster. The scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us that part of the role of the prophets is to call us to task, to keep us honest, and to keep our eyes to the message that God has for all of us. In this season of Advent, Malachi is not calling us to look to the rooftops for gifts, but to horizon for a messenger and a message that will speak to our deepest concerns and desires. Malachi is calling us to be watching and ready for a messenger from God.

Movement 4 – The Honest Savior vs. the Sanitized Savior

We are to be alert for a true and real messenger. This is the time of Advent when we are waiting for something deeper and greater than the life we currently live. We are to be alert for a message that calls us to cast off the surface liturgy, the comfortable prayers. We are to be alert for a messenger that is not sanitized but is true, honest, harsh and just. The prophet is calling us to look to step up in our worship, and to step up in our

faith. Like trading in a dust buster for a Dyson vacuum cleaner, or playing college football and then pro football, the prophet is calling us to watch for a messenger that will call us to a worship and a faith that goes beyond the motions. The prophet is calling us to watch for a true redeemer, a true savior who will cleanse us, who will be able to handle our doubts and our questions, and who will lead us to salvation.

This is not the church service that just tries to make you feel good. This is not the service that just tries to make you comfortable. This is a service, this is a messenger, this is a preacher who will call you to be honest with your concerns and your doubts and your fears. How many of us will deny our doubts? How many of us will say that we are not sure about the presence of God? How many of us will stand up in worship and claim that you wonder if God even cares about you and me? That is the place this messenger is calling us to God. Those are the harsh questions we are all called to voice and ask.

How many of us are ready to say, “I am a fallen person, broken?” How many of us are ready to say that we aren’t worthy of the worship, of the prayers of God. That is where the messenger is calling us to go. We are to be alert and waiting and ready for the true messenger who offers a message more powerful than one sung by any choir, preached by any preacher.

How many of us are willing to look at the world and name, and point at the points of despair. How many of us are ready to look at the darkness of the world and acknowledge that from that darkness. The messenger calls you to pray your honest prayers. Pray your questions from suffering, pray your hurts from feeling lost, pray your confusion and your tears. Step up in worship. Pray your praise with an honest heart. Sing out your joy to a loving and creating God. Sing out your faith even in the face of unknowing. The messenger, the one who is to come, calls us, pushes us and challenges us to step us to this kind of worship, this kind of faith.

We are called to be ready not just for the messenger, but for the message. Another prophet will just offer another word. But this messenger will offer God’s word. Another preacher, another worship service will just offer another small view of glory. But this messenger will reveal to us the power of God’s full grace and God’s full glory. We are waiting for the messenger with the true and powerful message of God.

Movement 5 – The High Stakes of a True Ritual

The messenger and the message will clean us and make us whole. We need to open ourselves to the presence of God, to the power of God, to the word of God that cut through the darkness of our lives and shines a light into our very hearts. This is the message that Malachi is calling us to embrace. This is the message that Malachi is calling us to be prepared for, one that calls us to be cleansed, the one that calls us to be honest and open and ready for the power and presence of God. Notice what happens with this messenger and this message – the people are cleansed. The priests and the followers of the law are cleaned up, are made right, and made presentable for the presence of God. They are rubbed with soap and away washes all of the dirt and grime that has built up because of the sanitized worship. They are held to the fire and all the impurities fall off, all of the surface praise, all of the inauthentic worship, all of the empty words of kindness fall away. The word, the message brings a harsh cleaning to the people of Israel to make them fully ready for the presence of God.

In the same way, the word calls for us to be cleansed. But it is nothing we can do. We cannot start the fire, we cannot hold the soap, all we can do is trust in God’s righteous and gentle hands to clean us and make us worthy of God’s presence. Some of you have been in the situation when you had to rely upon others for help and assistance in the basic chores of life. Some of you have even had to look to someone’s help to take a shower or a bath. You know what it is like to trust the hands of someone else. Yet we are called to take a deeper step and trust the hands of God to clean us and make us whole.

I heard a story of a hobo/tramp/bum/lumberer from a great American storyteller, Utah Phillips. The story was about “Frying pan Jack.” Frying pan Jack was someone who never went to college, who never got a formal education, but who said in 1927, “If I cannot dictate the conditions of my labor, I will henceforth cease to work.” I admire that kind of determination. I admire that independence, that freedom. It seems like a very

Baptist approach to life, to refuse to let anyone force him to work in a way that is demeaning, demoralizing, or degrading. I agree with him with most aspects of life, until it comes to God. When we think about God, we cannot dictate the conditions of our cleaning. We cannot dictate the conditions of our salvation. We can only rest and trust on God to clean us in the harsh and gentle way. To take the fuller's soap and wash off the dirt and the grime that has built up. To take us to the fire and let all of the imperfections rise to the top and be cast away. We have to trust the messenger and the message. We have to trust God and be ready to be cleaned.

I'm on a blog of pastors where we share thoughts and ideas about Advent. Just this week one of the pastors, a good friend of mine, shared an experience when he was meeting with a family in his neighborhood who just experienced a tragedy. One of the children, 17 years old, was attacked in the train station. Her boyfriend was shot in the head, and a bullet went right through her cheeks. Now we could gloss over this story in the advent season. We could sterilize this story and still look for the joy of the Lord. Or we could fall on our knees and say to our Lord, we cannot clean this mess. We cannot make this right. We can only rely upon your love and your grace to make something this wrong become right.

But do not fear, for this cleaning comes from love. The great preacher, Spurgeon described it as an intense focus on the individual. Think of God watching you, loving you, and working on you, just as a sculptor works on a stone, until you are just right. This cleaning is a harsh cleaning because of the dirt, but it is a gentle cleaning because it is guided by God's love. Allow yourself to be washed. Allow yourself to be cleansed by the message, by the Word, by the hand of God.

Movement 6 – The Hope of the Season; the Message of Christ

We are waiting for the messenger. We are waiting for the word, for the hope, for the promise. We are waiting for the message, and that word, promise, message will be known through the coming of Christ. This is what we look forward to in this season. Not the parties, not the present, not the decorations, for these are all surface, sanitized things in preparation of Christ. We look forward to that moment, that opportunity when we can indeed finally worship with honesty, with truth, with conviction, and with a level of trust that compels us to let go and let God work through us, clean us, and make us whole. We need this message!

We are waiting for the light. We are waiting for the light to come into the world, to shine into the darkness of our despair, of our questions, of our doubts, and of our struggles. We are waiting for the light of Christ to give us hope, and peace and mercy and grace. We are waiting for the light of Christ to shine into the world past the glitz and surface niceties and into the darkness of the world. We are waiting for that light to shine on us, to shine on the world, clean us, work through us, and make us whole. We need this light!

We are waiting for Christ. We are waiting for Christ the baby and Christ the redeemer to come into our lives. To empower us, convict us, and change us. We are waiting for Christ, the messenger and the message, the hope and the conviction, the prince of peace, the wonderful counselor the king of kings to change us, convict us, and make us whole. We are waiting for Christ. We need Christ!

In these last weeks before Christmas, come to worship with honesty, sincerity and authenticity. Bring your tired, your exhausted prayers. Bring your anger, your fears, and your honest cries for help. Bring them to an honest worship, and let God hear them, let God take time and hold them in your hands. Bring all that you are and that you have and know that the messenger, the prince of peace, the one who will make us ready for God is on the way, is coming and will arrive. The messenger is coming, with honesty, with conviction and with courage, let us prepare and wait for the coming of the Lord.

AMEN