

Our dog Bella and I walk almost every day. When I call her to me with the leash in my hand, she whines; and when I put her collar around her neck she can hardly sit still for me to do it. As we walk down our road toward Union Avenue she can barely contain her excitement- she runs through our trees, just to get some of her wiggles out! When we reach Union, she is so eager to go across the street- but I must caution her - for the traffic is often fast and very busy. "Wait Bella!" I say, "**Wait!!!**" Bella obeys, but her whole body still shivers with excitement.

When the traffic finally clears, I say, "OK! Let's GO!" -- and Bella bounds across the road to her day's great adventure, running and exploring along the irrigation ditch and into the groves of pecan trees and farm lands to discover birds, horses in their corrals, other dogs, -- and squirrels. In this season of the year, she knows to search for the squirrels who are harvesting nuts for their winter food (and by the way, they are quite fat this year!)

She loves the chase --but thankfully, the squirrel always finds a tree to climb just in the knick of time!

Undaunted, Bella continues to search in anticipation of another chase . . . she is sure that she is the luckiest dog in the world! But she knows she must wait, for there are obstacles on Union Avenue to be navigated first. //

Malachi was the last prophet to appear around 433 BC in the Old Testament, after the Israelites had returned from exile. Many of the prophets at that time spoke of extravagant hopes for the people. The new temple had been rebuilt about 80 years before, and the prophets had envisioned a glorious new age, but their promises had not appeared; and as the children of God usually do, they **became tired of waiting** and **began complaining**.

They accused God of unfaithfulness and questioned his sense of justice. Malachi listened, but instead of making excuses for God, he countered his argument with the people, saying that **he was tired of accepting their complaints**. He placed the blame on them, to say that the Lord had not changed- it was Judah who has been faithless.

They had not honored the LORD and had condoned evil in every part of their lives. They had not only been unfaithful to God, but also to each other. This lax living had been brought about by the Levite priests, who were to be examples of righteousness to

the people, but instead dishonored God with corrupt worship practices and lifestyles. They were a far cry from Levi, who had been the original priest of the people.

Malachi 3.1 (words of the Lord to Malachi)

"Malachi" means "messenger." Ancient languages can be confusing, and as we see in the first three verses of this passage: we have Malachi the prophetic messenger; Elijah, the Lord's messenger who will help prepare the way for the Lord, and the messenger of the covenant, Jesus. Then, in the NT, about 400 years later, we learn of John the Baptist, the messenger who prepared the way for Jesus. We must remember that this oracle occurred over 400 years before the birth of Christ!

The next 2 verses bring sure judgement, but also some hope that the people will be renewed, cleansed, and thus shine like silver!

3.2-4

Malachi declares: "The messenger of the covenant (Jesus) in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But 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 washer's 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, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in former years." Malachi is saying that there is hope for us.

John Calvin wrote, "The power of the fire, we know, is twofold: for it burns and it purifies; It burns off what is corrupt; and purifies gold and silver from their dross. "

Purification has another possible purpose, as well, in addition to the removal of impurities. When silver is refined, it is treated with carbon or charcoal preventing the absorption of oxygen and resulting in its sheen and purity. A silversmith knows that the refining process is complete only when she observes her "own image reflected in the mirror-like surface of the metal. Perhaps the prophet also suggests that the image of God is restored in this process, that humanity is considered by God to be good and righteous when once again the divine image is reflected in the human heart.

Calvin thought that the refiner's fire would serve to correct the corruption not only of the people, but also of the Levitical priests also . . . who ought to have been guides to others, and who were supposed to be the pattern of holiness in the church.

God, however, promises that this purification would be brought about by Christ, and that the fire would consume the whole people, purify them like silver, that they may be redeemed.

This tiny child, who at birth in Bethlehem becomes God-with-us, Emmanuel, and grows up to be recognized as our Lord and Savior, the Son of Man, our Teacher, who brought love and peace to ensure a complicated, angry, congested world that he is always with us, at the very least we can honor his coming by a ritual cleansing of our souls -- to look inward and see the obstacles that lie in our path to a life that is worthy of him.

This reflection that we do during Confession each Sunday clears our hearts and minds so that we may receive God's word anew, to ingest and thus trust the promises of the gospel. It is time to think on our faithfulness to God and to one another so that we have peace on all accounts; to be reconciled and to receive with deeper gratitude the Gift of Love we have been given. The Holy Spirit moves us to receive our Lord with clean hearts -- and with great expectation, to greet the ultimate joy and gift of the Christ child.

Advent is waiting with the knowledge that we, though unworthy, are wholly loved by our merciful Lord. It is important that we not see ourselves as a "good person who makes mistakes," but as a "sinner in need of God's mercy." Then, trusting in God's mercy, we can see the reason for waiting in a state of penitence that reminds us of the need for a savior.//

George Friedrich Handel was born in 1685. He was German by birth, but his remarkable musical gifts led him to become the servant of the King of England. He composed music almost entirely for the entertainment of the King and his court but was also a devout Christian. The lyrics for the operas and oratorios were written by librettists appointed by the King, and not all were of the best quality; but Handel managed to save the poor texts by his beautiful music!

One day, a friend named Charles Jennens appeared at Handel's apartment door with a new manuscript and begged Handel to take a look at it. Handel absent-mindedly thanked him and put it on a shelf, probably because he was in the middle of a composition requested by the King. Then, 18 months later, he noticed the dusty manuscript and took it down from the shelf. Jennens was an evangelical Christian and had charted out the entire salvation history of the Christian faith by exclusively using verses from the Bible and a few writings from the Anglican Book of Common Worship.

Inspired by the beauty and depth of the biblical story, the words spoke to Handel's faith and touched his heart. He immediately began composing a new, sacred oratorio, or un-staged drama. He was so obsessed with his new creation that he hardly ate or slept. If servants or friends came to his door they would find him disheveled and undressed in the middle of the day. He finished the work, "Messiah" in barely more than 3 weeks. With all the choral, solo, and instrumental parts, the masterpiece contained more than 1,000 pages.

In the Advent section of "Messiah," part of today's scripture from the Malachi text is used. I have been meditating daily on the Advent/Christmas portion of the work, and I encourage you to listen as well. The beauty of it will transport you to a spiritual place.

I have included links below to the biblical texts and a most superb video performance in Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, by the American Bach Soloists, easily available on YouTube. The soloists will knock your socks off!

I encourage you to listen to a portion each day while reading the scriptures. You will be astounded by Handel's prodigious gifts, which he offered to God, and which he in turn also offered to all of God's people as his legacy of Christian faith. The conductor, singers, and instrumentalists of The American Bach Soloists have done the same -- they have given all that they are for your inspiration. *

Advent is meant to be a time of searching for the incredible meaning of it all -- our lives, our sense of hope and faith, our dreams of the future, and how these things relate to the birth of Jesus; but our chase tends to be in all other directions except the Christ Child.

How shall we receive him? How do we present ourselves to the Child,
who is, after all, God in the manger?

We came to worship today knowing that all these things have already come to pass,

and we are now pondering our faith in Christ.

Malachi asks, Are we prepared? Can we stand?

Can we answer to Our Lord Christ on the day of his second coming?

Christ beckons us to come and find peace at this table, to embrace our Lord Jesus as both a tiny child and as the anointed Messiah, who now lives but first died for us so that we might be reconciled both to God, and to each other.

Many of us, like Bella, are "caught up in the chase of the season."

Instead of how we should receive Jesus,

our focus is pulled toward the gifts our friends and family might receive from us under the Christmas tree. "What do you want for Christmas?" we ask.
"What do you want, above any other gift?"

Our grandson Will's favorite Christmas hymn is "In the Bleak Midwinter," an old 19th C. English hymn that ponders this very question: the singer asks in verse 3:

"What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him; I give him my heart."

There is no material thing on earth we can we give
that would convey our profound gratitude for such an incredible gift.
"Our hearts," is the only acceptable answer.

All the presents under our collective Christmas trees would not suffice,
nor adequately reflect our gratitude.
Christ will accept, and cherish, our faithful hearts.

Amen.

Our Communion Hymn is #533, "In the Singing"

* Links to G.F. Handel's "Messiah" (on YouTube)
"Handel's Messiah in Grace Cathedral" (recorded December 5, 2019).
<https://www.google.com/search?q=handel%27s+messiah+in+grace+cathedral>

Libretto Verse References (Google)
<https://haventoday.org/blog/handels-messiah-lyrics-verse-references/>
