

## God Tenderizes—Second Sunday of Advent

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[Malachi 3:1-4](#)

[Luke 1:68-79](#)

[Luke 3:1-6](#)

*Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT*

Instead of a Psalm today from the Old Testament we've got a treat from Luke's Gospel. The Canticle (or the song) of Zechariah. You all know an angel came to Mary to announce to her that she would be the mother of Jesus, the mother of God... that same angel, so the story goes in Luke, several months before, appeared to Zechariah.

Zechariah was an important priest of the temple, from a good family. And in the temple an angel told him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, in their old age—just like Sarah and Abraham—would have a son, who was to be named John. And that son would *not* be a priest of the temple like Zechariah, but instead a prophet.

The angel says that this son John, “will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before [God], to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” But to this announcement, Zechariah is skeptical. He says, “Ehh, sounds impossible...” And for his skepticism, he is struck dumb. He cannot speak until the moment that Elizabeth delivers, and John is named.

And the canticle we have spoken today is Zechariah's first act of speech.

This skepticism of priests, of experts, of the insiders of religion, is also what Malachi's prophecy is all about from the Old Testament. Malachi was not happy with the priests of his day. And this was at the time of the dedication of the new temple, after the people returned from exile in Babylon to their worship space in ruins. But Malachi felt the powerful ones needed to get their priorities straight.

And the same is exactly true of John the Baptist's time, and Jesus' time too. You all heard the soup of geopolitical leaders in charge of all the various regions on that side of the Mediterranean. At this time religious experts were running amok with what little power they had. And then John comes. John comes to prepare them for the coming of Christ. And just like in Malachi, that preparation is hard. This preparation is called in Luke: repentance. But the

preparation offered by John, the preparation of God, is not about tossing sinners into hell, or tossing anyone into hell at all. It's about God tossing out what is extra, what is blocking us. **And that process requires we tell the truth about ourselves, and the truth about others.**

For example, often, these days in our culture, when you talk to white men of a certain age—they feel very trodden upon; they feel that the heat has been turned up on them. They can't get jobs like they used to, or they just aren't treated with respect anymore. What is happening, is that people have begun to tell the truth. The history of the United States involves violence, prejudice and slavery; against women, against gay and queer folks, against people of color. Has God forgotten white, straight men—has God forsaken our culture? Or are they (and I, as well) being prepared, being asked to repent and to change our perspective? This is the kind of preparation that John the Baptist offers.

To be fair, of course, all need to repent. And to turn up the heat on everyone, and not just white men—we are also in an of age truth-telling about social media (to say nothing of gun violence and school shootings). All people of all kinds use social media platforms of one or the other. Experts agree social media of all types harms the mental health of everyone who engages on it—it causes high rates of suicide in young girls. It creates forums for terrorism, bullying, and invasions of privacy.

I was watching a comedy special recently on Netflix that spoke very *prophetically* about social media and the elites who control it. The special is called "Inside" by the comedian Bo Burnham. It's not super kid friendly, definitely rated R, so don't go home and watch with the kids. But it's very good and very important. Made throughout the pandemic, while we were all locked inside, it's sort of a man-with-a-camera-and-some-lights kind of project. And much of this special shines a light on the kinds of mental health troubles festering in our culture, and made so much worse by the year of isolation we all had to endure.

Bo Burnham's special is full of a kind of prophecy, in the strict biblical sense—full of truth-telling. In one scene he's lying in bed, clearly depressed, and he says this:

*I don't know about you guys, but, um, you know, I've been thinking recently that... that you know, maybe, um, allowing giant digital media corporations to exploit the neurochemical drama of our children for profit...*

*You know, maybe that was, uh... a bad call by us. Maybe...maybe the...the flattening of the entire subjective human experience into a ... lifeless exchange of value that benefits nobody, except for, um, you know, a handful of bug-eyed salamanders in Silicon Valley...*

*Maybe that as a... as a way of life forever... maybe that's, um, not good.*

The truth.

In the Christian world, the Lutheran Christian world, we call this truth—the law; the measuring stick that shows us we have messed up; a call to awake, to be aware—to let God turn us around. As you might know, the word “repentance” means to literally turn around, to turn, and to look, and see what we are doing that is so completely against God’s will for us. The baptism that John in Luke’s Gospel offered was a kind of ritual cleansing, that acknowledged our selfishness and stuckness. John does not call us to wallow in guilt, and neither does John threaten us with hell-fire either, as I said before.

Because next Sunday too we will hear from Luke about John’s ministry: John’s was a ministry of preparation—not condemnation. Notice in Malachi the images of refining silver and fuller’s soap. Fullers’ soap is used to remove dirt and gunk from sheeps’ skin. This is a messy and rough process. The Hebrew word for “fuller” comes from a root meaning “to tread”—and that is what these laborers did, they stomped and trod under foot these skins to make them ready for use. And, of course, refining silver is a long process that requires fire and high temperatures.

But notice: the point of the stomping and the fire is not to destroy or throw away. It is to prepare, to make better, to make these things what they were meant to be. This is the work of fullers, of refiners, and also of prophets, of John the Baptizer. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. **God tenderizes us.** God, through all kinds of truth-tellers, neutralizes our out-of-control ego. God makes us able to even believe and trust, able to accept that there is something bigger than us in the first place.

Because remember: Zechariah, John’s father, was a big-shot priest in his own eyes. He was not ready to say yes to God and to God’s promises for him. But do you know who did say yes to God? Who was prepared to say yes? Elizabeth’s cousin, Mary. Mary, the meek and small. Mary, the prepared and ready. Mary through whom God became flesh.

And in the season of Advent, we give thanks for all the prophets of the world—past and present—who, by the Holy Spirit, help us repent—who prepare us for God. For we do believe that in our very own bodies, in our lives—as the body of Christ—very soon, God will indeed show up.

*Amen.*