

## **Luke 3: 1-6**

**NOBEL PRIZE WINNER, ELIE WEISEL, WRITES OF A CHILDHOOD MEMORY. 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 ASK, “DID YOU HAVE A GOOD QUESTION TODAY?”**

**MALACHI HAD SOME 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? MALACHI POSES 22 QUESTIONS IN JUST 55 VERSES.**

**MALACHI WAS WRITING IN A POST-EXILIC PERIOD, MEANING THAT PEOPLE HAD JUST RETURNED HOME AFTER BEING EXILED IN BABYLON. MALACHI WAS CALLING THE PEOPLE INTO RIGHT LIVING. HE SAYS THERE ARE STILL EXPECTATIONS; THERE ARE STILL STANDARDS. GOD CALLS GOD’S PEOPLE INTO CLEAN LIVING, WHOLE AND HEALING RELATIONSHIPS, SERVICE THAT BUILDS UP RATHER THAN TEARS DOWN. GOD’S LAW IS STILL A MEASURE BY WHICH ETHICS, OR BEHAVIOR IN COMMUNITY, IS JUDGED.**

**ADVENT IS MOST COMMONLY REFERRED TO AS A SEASON OF WAITING. BUT THE MINOR PROPHETS DON’T LET US OFF THAT EASY. THEY RIGHTLY POINT OUT THAT THERE IS A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WAITING AND PREPARING. AS CHILDREN, WE THOUGHT WAITING WAS THE HARD PART. AS ADULTS, WE’VE LEARNED THAT WAITING AROUND ISN’T GOING TO GET THE DECORATING AND BAKING DONE, THE PRESENTS WRAPPED OR THE CHRISTMAS CARDS IN THE MAIL. THE CHRISTIAN REMEMBRANCE OF ADVENT REMINDS US THAT THERE IS A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WAITING AND PREPARING. AND THAT, WHEN IT COMES TO OUR SOULS AND OUR SPIRITS...NOT JUST OUR TREES...THERE IS TRIMMING AND LIGHTING AND SPRUCING UP TO DO. THE CHRISTIAN REMEMBRANCE OF ADVENT INVOLVES WHAT POET LUCI SHAW CALLS “THE KIND OF WAITING THAT FEELS LIKE WORK.” WHICH IS EXACTLY THE KIND OF WAITING THE HEARERS OF MALACHI’S PROPHECY DON’T WANT TO HEAR.**

**“WHERE IS THE GOD OF JUSTICE?” IT IS NOT AN UNCOMMON QUESTION FOR THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL TO ASK. IN SLAVERY IN EGYPT—WHERE IS GOD? WHY HASN’T GOD HEARD US AND LIBERATED US? IN THE WILDERNESS, WANDERING FOR 40 YEARS—WHERE IS GOD? WHY HASN’T GOD LED US INTO THE PROMISED LAND YET? UNDER THE RULE OF TYRANT KINGS, IN EXILE, EXPERIENCING CALAMITY---WHERE IS GOD? WHY HASN’T GOD SAVED US? TWO-THIRDS OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS IS MADE UP OF THESE PRAYERS.**

**SO WHAT DOES MALACHI MEAN WHEN HE ACCUSES THE PEOPLE SAYING THAT THEY HAVE “WEARIED THE LORD WITH THEIR WORDS?” THIS IS NOT A CASE OF OBEDIENT FOLLOWERS EXPERIENCE UNJUST SUFFERING. INSTEAD THE RECIPIENTS OF MALACHI’S PROPHECY, THE PEOPLE OF THE COVENANT ARE LIVING DISOBEDIENT LIVES, AND THEY DO NOT THINK THAT IT MATTERS ONE WAY OR ANOTHER—BECAUSE GOD IS TOTALLY ABSENT FROM THE SCENE AND DOES NOTHING ANYWAY. THEY AREN’T ASKING, “WHERE IS GOD?” WITH CLENCHED FISTS OR TEARS BUT, INSTEAD, THEY ARE ASKING “WHERE IS GOD?” WITH A SHRUG OF THEIR**

SHOULDERS AND THE TINIEST SMIRK OF A SMILE. GOD ISN'T HERE. GOD DOESN'T CARE WHAT WE DO. WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE WHETHER WE CHOOSE OBEDIENCE OR DISOBEDIENCE? JUSTICE OR INJUSTICE? KINDNESS OR MEANNESS?

BACK IN 2016, A MEME BECAME POPULAR OF A CARTOON DOG, SITTING AT A TABLE WITH A CUP OF COFFEE. WITH THE ROOM AROUND HIM IN FLAMES, THE SPEECH BUBBLE COMING FROM HIS MOUTH READ, "IT'S FINE." DRAWN AS AN INDICTMENT OF THE WAY WE ACCEPT OR NORMALIZE BEHAVIORS THAT SHOULD, IN FACT, CONCERN US. WE HEAR EVIDENCE OF CLEAR WRONG-DOING BY PUBLIC OFFICIALS. "IT'S FINE." WE GIVE INTO ADDICTION, TEMPTATION, ANGER OR DESPAIR. "IT'S FINE." WE ACCEPT THE EXPECTATION OF 60 HOUR WORK WEEKS AND EXPECT THE SAME FROM OTHERS IN RETURN. WE AREN'T PRESENT TO OUR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS AS WE WOULD LIKE. "IT'S FINE."

AS INSIGHTFUL AS THIS MIGHT BE FOR US TODAY, IT IS EXACTLY THE SAME BEHAVIOR GOD'S PEOPLE WERE TEMPTED BY AND ENGAGED IN NEARLY 2400 YEARS AGO. THEY ALLOWED THEIR RELATIONSHIPS TO DETERIORATE, THEIR HOME LIVES WERE IN SHAMBLES BUT WITH "I'M SURE THIS IS FINE." THEY WENT THROUGH THE MOTIONS SPIRITUALLY, DID THE BARE MINIMUM (AND MAYBE NOT EVEN THAT) WHEN IT CAME TO LOVING THEIR NEIGHBOR. "IT'S FINE." CORRUPTION AND INJUSTICE DOMINATED THEIR PUBLIC LIFE. "IT'S FINE." AFTER ALL, WHERE IS GOD ANYWAY?

MANY PREFER TO SKIP ADVENT AND GET RIGHT TO CHRISTMAS. THIS GETTING READY THING CAN BE DIFFICULT. REPENTANCE IS HARD WORK. JOHN THE BAPTIST'S CHALLENGE TO REPENT AND PREPARE IS PREPARATION THAT WORKS UP A SWEAT. TRUE REPENTANCE MEANS LITERALLY, TO CHANGE ONE'S MIND, TURN AROUND, REORIENT ONESELF. JOHN, LIKE THE PROPHET MALACHI, CALLS ALL PEOPLE TO TURN TO GOD AND AWAY FROM SIN. WE DON'T LIKE THE IDEA OF BEING WASHED WITH FULLER'S SOAP, WHATEVER THAT IS. IT REMINDS ME OF LAVA SOAP. YOU KNEW YOU WERE DIRTY IF IT TOOK LAVA SOAP TO GET YOU CLEAN.

WHILE WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO GET OUT OF THE FULLER'S SOAP REFERENCE CLAIMING WE DON'T KNOW WHAT IT MEANS, WE ALL KNOW WHAT FIRE IS. REFINER'S FIRE...MEANS EVEN HOTTER. IT IS BURNING AWAY IMPURITIES. SURE, WE MIGHT COME OUT BETTER, STRONGER, CLEANER, BUT STILL...WHO WOULD CHOOSE SUCH A PROCESS? WHO CAN ENDURE THE DAY OF HIS COMING?

WE CAN. THAT'S THE MESSAGE HERE. THAT'S ADVENT IN A NUTSHELL. WHO CAN ENDURE? WE CAN. BECAUSE WE ARE NOT ALONE. BECAUSE THE ONE WHO CALLS, THE ONE WHO BRINGS THE SOAP AND STOKES THE FIRE, IS THE ONE WHO WALKS WITH US.

SOMEONE ONCE ASKED WHY MALACHI TALKS MORE ABOUT SILVER THAN GOLD. GOLD IS MORE VALUABLE, ISN'T IT? GOLD IS THE BEST, THE TOP OF THE LINE. YET, SILVER APPEARS TWICE. SILVER IS MORE LABOR-INTENSIVE IN THE REFINING PROCESS. IN REFINING SILVER, THE SMITH HAS TO STAY CLOSE. YOU CAN'T PUT SILVER IN THE FIRE AND LEAVE IT ALONE, IT HAS TO BE ATTENDED. YOU HAVE TO STAY CLOSE ENOUGH TO WATCH. THE SILVERSMITH MUST LEAN IN, RISKING THE HEAT, WARY OF THE IMPURITIES SPITTING HOT MOLTEN SILVER

**ONTO EXPOSED FLESH. JEWELERS SAY YOU CAN ALWAYS SPOT A SILVERSMITH BY THE SCARS.**

**LIKE A SILVERSMITH, THE LORD ROLLS UP THE DIVINE SLEEVES AND REACHES INTO THE CORNERS OF OUR LIVES WHERE WE'VE LET THE CLUTTER OF OUR BROKENNESS AND SINFULNESS ACCUMULATE, CONVINCING OURSELVES THAT WE'RE CLEAN ENOUGH AND IT'S FINE. BUT IT DOESN'T MEASURE UP TO GOD'S STANDARDS. SO DURING ADVENT WE SET ABOUT THE BUSINESS OF CLEANING, OF HEALING, OR REPAIRING SO THAT OUR LIVES WILL BE CLEAN FOR HIS ARRIVAL. HARD WORK. WHILE MANY ARE EAGER TO SING AND HEAR THE FAMILIAR CHRISTMAS CAROLS, ADVENT HYMN THEMES ARE UNSUNG AND UNPOPULAR.**

**IT ISN'T EASY, THIS CLEANING PROCESS. THE SILVERSMITH WILL TELL YOU THAT THE METAL IS READY TO BE WORKED INTO SHAPE, TO BE USED FOR THE JEWELER'S PURPOSE WHEN HE CAN SEE HIS FACE REFLECTED. HOW WILL WE KNOW WHEN WE'RE CLEAN? WHEN GOD'S FACE RADIATES FROM ALL WE DO AND SAY.**

**MALACHI'S WORDS HAVE A SUPPORTING PART IN HANDEL'S MESSIAH, APPEARING EARLY IN THE WORK. AFTER THE FIRST PRESENTATION OF THE *MESSIAH* IN LONDON IN 1741, HANDEL WROTE TO A FRIEND: "I SHOULD BE SORRY IF I ONLY ENTERTAINED THEM. I WISHED TO MAKE THEM BETTER." ALTHOUGH BY 1751, HANDAL WAS BLIND, UNTIL HIS DEATH HE CONDUCTED *MESSIAH* AS AN ANNUAL BENEFIT FOR THE FOUNDING HOSPITAL IN LONDON, WHICH SERVED MOSTLY WIDOWS AND ORPHANS OF THE CLERGY. THE INTENT WAS NOT JUST TO ENTERTAIN; HANDEL'S HOPE WAS TO MAKE THEM JUST AND BETTER. HIS EAR WAS OPEN TO THE PROPHETIC WORD: "PRESENT OFFERINGS TO THE LORD IN RIGHTEOUSNESS."**

**ADVENT URGES US TO LOOK INSIDE OURSELVES. TO LOOK INSIDE OUR CHURCH. WHAT NEEDS REFINING? WHAT HAVE WE HUNG ONTO FOR SO LONG THAT WE HAVE EXCUSED IT AWAY AS FINE.....IT'S OKAY. MALACHI OPENS THE CHURCH AND US TO DEEP QUESTIONS. MAY WE GIVE HEED TO THEM AS WE OPEN OURSELVES TO THE REFINING POWER OF THE DIVINE SILVERSMITH. AMEN.**