

The Third Church Pulpit
Sermons from Third Presbyterian Church
Rochester, New York

“John’s Story, Part I”

John Wilkinson

December 9, 2018



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Church**

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Second Sunday of Advent

Malachi 3:1–4 and Luke 3:1–6

The Rev. John A. Cairns served as pastor of Third Church from 1989 to 1999. Many of you experienced John’s faithful ministry here, whether through his gifts of preaching and teaching or his strong commitments to justice. I was privileged to work with John for a time in Chicago before we came here. We have conveyed our sympathy to Betsy and the family this week as we learned of the news of John’s death on Wednesday. A memorial service will be held a week from tomorrow at the First Presbyterian Church of Sarasota, where John and Betsy have been active. Betsy’s address is available by contacting the church office. May we continue to hold the Cairns family in our prayers in this season of grief and gratitude.

Advent is not Lent, exactly, but they are not exactly different, either. Both can be seasons of reflection as we prepare for what is to come. Lent has a certain solemnity associated with it, but Advent might as well, a time to ask big questions of faith and life. After all, if the birth of Jesus, the coming of God incarnate into the world, doesn’t make us pause and take stock, what will?

Advent offers us John the Baptist, and the questions prompted this morning arise from his life and ministry, coupled with the reading from the prophet Malachi. The questions are also prompted by the moment in which we live, the cultural and political moment in which we live. They are uneasy questions, or at least they are for me, questions that can lead to messy or challenging answers.

But I think they are the right questions. They come to my inbox in one form or another every day in articles I receive. They come in watching the news. They come

in conversations with you. They are not new questions, as old as the prophets, as old as the life of Jesus, as old as John Calvin or Martin Luther King, Jr. But their specific form and sense of urgency is new and timely and specific.

Yesterday at our Advent retreat, we asked the simple question – if Advent means “to come,” what do you hope to come, what do you want to come. Some answers were personal – family or children or grandchildren. But several articulated, and the gathering agreed, that one thing we wanted to come was a different tone to our politics, civility, respect. Perhaps that response had particular undertones; I don’t know, we did not ask. But it was a more universal affirmation as well.

So I wonder: what is the relationship between faith and politics?

And I wonder: how do our faith commitments lead us to political action, and what happens when we disagree?

This needs to be a biblical conversation, the search for responses to these questions. The good news is that it can be. Malachi speaks of God sending a messenger – we will get to that in a bit. The messenger will purify. We don’t like that word, “purify.” We are wary, and rightly so, of purity. Here it means removing impurities like a fire would do for a precious metal. Still, there is burning involved, and cleaning with a very strong soap.

But to what end? So that our faith might be worthy to offer to God. We will be refined and purified until we present ourselves to God in “righteousness.” Not self-righteousness. Righteousness.

Righteousness in biblical Hebrew is always paired with “justice,” as in justice and righteousness. God wants our faith to be worthy, but that worthiness in large part means how we live our lives, our ethics, our values, and yes, our politics.

Then we encounter John the Baptist, who I must admit scares me a little bit! John’s task was to “proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” We don’t like those words either: “repentance, sins.” But here they are, and we know they are the right words.

On personal levels, we know there are behaviors and attitudes that need refining, purifying, that need the good and hard work of repentance, a course correction, a

change of direction. And the same is true communally, whether in the life of this congregation or the life of the world. So our personal ethics and values, and our communal ones as well. And yes, our politics.

John the Baptist, clearly a messenger like the one envisioned by Malachi, channels the prophet Isaiah in calling for us to prepare, to straighten out the crooked, to even out the rough. That has many implications, but I can't help but believe that our preparations for the coming of the Christ child must include paying attention to matters of justice and righteousness in the world.

So the first question, the relationship between faith and politics. Not whether, but what. If we are being refined and purified in order to perform acts of righteousness, what does that look like? If our repentance leads us to acts of justice, what does that look like? Not whether, but what.

In the history of Presbyterianism in the United States, there was a doctrine called "the spirituality of the church." That meant, to those who were proponents and practitioners, that the church was to focus exclusively on spiritual matters, and not earthly ones. That doctrine was wrong, I believe, and more than wrong. It allowed slavery, for example, to be rationalized away as a topic not appropriate for the church to consider, allowing good Presbyterians to be comfortable in their piety while either ignoring, or bracketing out, or even justifying, the evil practice of human enslavement.

But it is not just that. Justice and righteousness take on many forms, and we repeatedly get our marching orders from the Bible itself – clear and compelling.

- When the prophets tell us to pay attention to the sojourner and the widow, or to offer a portion of our harvest to the refugee, then faith and politics meet.
- When Jesus tells his followers to let the children come to him, then how can faith and politics not meet as we think about public education, or the devastating impact of poverty on our youngest neighbors?
- When Paul says there is no Jew or Greek, no male or female, faith and politics meet again as we engage issues of sexism and homophobia or

transphobia, that begin with a discussion of ethics and values but lead inevitably to matters of policy and the public good.

Which leads to the second question: where does all this lead, and what happens when there is disagreement, even conflict? You will remember Martin Luther King, Jr.'s iconic "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." The recipients of the letter were the white religious leaders in Birmingham, so this is not a theoretical question. The white leaders were telling King two things – being from Atlanta, this was not his fight, and being a person of faith, this was not his fight. But they were wrong on both counts. Faith, a commitment to justice and righteousness, leads inevitably to action, and where faith is involved, there can be no borders. There can be choices, of course. Some will choose to work on this and some will choose to work on that. The Spirit will call us to one place or another, or one tactic or location or another.

This congregation was called to engage matters of race and slavery and abolition in the 1800's, but not always easily and not always unanimously.

In the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, our call has been around matters of gender and sexuality and inclusivity and equality, whether the ordination of women or the ordination of LGBTQ Presbyterians. Those of you who have been here longer than I remember conversations that were robust and vigorous and rarely unanimous.

That is why we need refining and purifying and repentance, to provide the course corrections and changes of direction that will lead us ever more deeply to justice and righteousness. But not self-righteousness.

I worry right now, and sometimes I worry a great deal, that the move to self-righteousness is an easy one to make. What that looks like is an insistence, across the spectrum, that a particular political position is the only legitimate trajectory of a particular faith position, that if you are a follower of Jesus you can only believe one thing about a thing, or, conversely, if you believe a different thing about a thing you can't possibly be a person of faith, a follower of Jesus, a Christian.

No party has a monopoly on religious ethics. That's dangerous territory. It is self-righteous and it leaves no room for the Spirit.

Certain things seem clear – it would be hard to maintain a pro-slavery position and profess yourself to be Christian in 2018, if it ever was easy. But can there be gray area on other matters, or perhaps purple areas, where red and blue come together to make something new?

That is to say, faith and politics yes, but faith that insists on a particular partisan position, and that dismisses others, no. We can debate ideas, and we should, about immigration or choice or gun violence. But we can't say let's not talk about this. And we can't vilify or demonize those who disagree with us, especially using our faith as a means to exclude, self-righteousness at its worst.

Let's not fall prey to that argument, which is so strong and so pervasive, that if you are Christian you must have a certain set of political beliefs, or that if you do hold a certain set of beliefs, you can't possibly be Christian. That can't be a faithful product of the faith and politics question. It simply cannot.

That means we will disagree, of course, or that conversations can be difficult and messy and unsettling. Great risk is involved. But mature faith can handle that, and, after all, we all need purifying and refining and repentance.

We can't bury our heads and we can't shrug our shoulders and we can't avoid simply in order to maintain an uneasy peace. The Bible won't allow that. John the Baptist won't allow that. And certainly Jesus won't allow that. And there are plenty of needs where we can find common ground that will make a difference in the world anyway.

And one thing more. We look at the prophets and we look at John the Baptist and we look at Jesus. We look at people like Martin Luther King or contemporary prophetic leaders, and our tendency is to offload and outsource responsibility for all this to them. That won't fly either. Biblical faith, and certainly a Presbyterian version of it, insists that all are messengers, that all are prophets, that we are all called to prepare the way.

John's story is our story. That is daunting. But it is true.

So let us use these days of Advent, as we prepare our hearts and home and world for the coming of a baby who, as a man, will rule the world with truth and grace, let us be open to the ways we need to be refined and purified, and what repentance will

look like for us. Then let us enter the prophetic highway, knowing there are fellow travelers in this place. And let us prepare a way, not only for Jesus, but for all of God's children, a way marked by reconciliation and joy, by righteousness and justice, so that our offering will be pleasing to God, and all flesh - all flesh - shall see the salvation of God. Amen.

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