Make Straight God's Path 12/8/24

(Luke 3:1-6) Rev. James Koyama

Not Infatuation

This morning's readings give us some good ways to think about the love candle and its flame of love. The prophet Malachi reminds us that love is a refiner's fire, that burns away the dross separating us from God's love.

The fire he describes is not the fire of infatuation and romance that is celebrated in heady pop songs or written about in the diaries of teenagers. Infatuation has more to do with basking in our own emotional needs than it has to do with any real relationship with the other person.

The fire Malachi is talking about is a refining fire, that burns away all these superficial understandings of love and brings us face to face with the reality of who the other people in our lives really are; revealing us to each other in all our beauty and brokenness. And what we are left with is the pure metal; a love that is real and permanent.

Covenanted & Agape Love

The love which Malachi is directing us toward, comes through living in covenant. His understanding of Covenant has its origins thousands of years ago, when one society in the Ancient Near East would conquer another. And the "Covenant" was the agreement handed down by the Victor, letting the newly conquered people know what was expected of them. It was a one-sided agreement, binding the conquered people in servitude to their new masters.

The Old Testament writers took this understanding of Covenant and modified it to describe their relationship with God. They too saw God as having all the power and the people as God's helpless subjects.

But there was a key difference. The covenants drawn up by the God of the Bible were not one-sided. This was a God who's desire was not simply to exploit his subjects. Instead, he wanted to see them thrive and to serve him of their own free will. The covenant God made with them, was based on a two-way relationship of in which both sides took care of the needs of the other.

And of course, for us as Christians, the ultimate sign of God's sincerity comes with the "New Covenant" that God made with us in giving us his beloved son Jesus, who comes to dwell in our midst and give his life for

our sakes. In the flesh, before our eyes, he demonstrates the self-sacrificial love in the heart of God.

So unlike infatuation or the more superficial things that we associate with love; the love represented by our second candle is sacrificial. It is a love that is forged in the giving of our lives for the well-being of others.

It's not easy to subject ourselves to this purifying flame. At first we feel our covenantal bonds as though they are more like a ball and chain; as a necessary duty to fulfill, one that we may begrudge. But in our willingness to persevere in giving as Christ gave, the dross is burned away and what is revealed to us is Christ love in all its purity, which we call "Agape" love. And that is the flame of love that burns as our second candle this morning. It is the flame of "agape" love.

Not that Flashy a Spiritual Practice

It seems to me that the Gospel reading, in which John the Baptist cries out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight' is a call to put into action the practices that will invite God's agape love into our hearts. It is a call to practice our covenantal obligations in a self-sacrificial way, so that the saving power of God's love may do it's work.

Let me repeat John the Baptist's call to us: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Making God's Path Straight

It sounds like a great idea to engage in this spiritual practice, but how should we begin? My guess is that the opportunity will come to us, perhaps in an unexpected way. After all, the Christ child, the King of Kings was born into a very unexpected and every day circumstance.

That opportunity came to Sheryl and myself the day before Thanksgiving when her father Lloyd was suddenly hospitalized with a perforated intestine. For a couple of days he lay in the ICU going in and out of consciousness. The doctors were fearful that he would not survive surgery, so they stabilized him and waited. Sheryl's brother Dan flew in from Minnesota and end of life issues were discussed. If he were to survive, all the signs were pointing to a much less mobile life.

Miraculously, his condition started to improve and amazingly, he is doing so well that he has been released and is back home with Ann and even up and walking.

But the writing is on the wall. The scare made it clear that the windown for moving to a more extended level of care is small, and it is time for them to return to Minnesota, where they will have the larger family close by. And so Sheryl and Dan began the gentle process of encouraging them to consider the move, which they have agreed to. It's hard to move when you are over 90! And so Sheryl has been over at their place, sorting through boxes with them and coming home looking all sneezy from the dust that it kicks up. It's a sacrifice of love that she has willingly taken up.

The Spiritual Practice of Advent Preparation Came to Us

In the midst of all of this, I wondered about where we would find time to give ourselves spiritually to the journey through Advent. I sighed and thought to myself that the world doesn't stop for Advent or Christmas. But then, on reading today's Gospel, I realized that the spiritual practice of preparing for Christ's coming had already come to us. But it had come in an unexpected way, from the same world of every day concerns that we had hoped to set aside.

What was Sheryl doing going down to care for her parents each day, preparing them gently for the trip to Minnesota? What was she doing sitting at the table with Dan, arranging "Meals on Wheels" and "Physical Therapy" and getting everything in order for them. What was she doing as she sorted through those dusty boxes?

Whether she thought of it this way or not, she was answering John the Baptist's call. She was preparing the way for her parents who, God bless them, have always been independent, but are simply unable to physically and mentally handle what needs to happen. She was making the rough places smooth; taking out the road blocks and making straight the highway to the next step in their journey; doing it sacrificially, because she loves them. And in doing this, she was preparing her heart to receive the Lord on Christmas Eve.

Spiritual Discipline

As obvious as this seems to me now, I first thought of Lloyd's sudden illness as a diversion from the practice of Advent. But then I realized that it was the hardship of dealing with the unexpected that was important for us. And that the sacrifice of our vacation time was our purifying fire.

It occurs to me that words like Spiritual Discipline and Spiritual Practice, that we associate with Advent and also Lent, have the words "discipline" and "practice" tacked onto them, because they require effort. And this suggests to me that when unexpected things happen that require effort, especially during the holidays, we shouldn't see them as a distraction, but more as an opportunity to practice giving of ourselves as a preparation for the Lord's coming.

I'm not sure that this is the right message for everyone this Advent. My guess is that some of you just need some peace and quiet and time alone to reflect and refocus during Advent. However, based on Sheryl and my own experience this year, I would say, pay special attention to the things that first appear to be distractions; the unexpected things that come up as you travel through this Advent season. They may be the very opportunities God is providing, as the right preparation for Christ's coming on Christmas Eve.