

Moonstruck Prophet

The Second Sunday of Advent: Malachi 3.1-4

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On Friday, I made the mistake of reading the book of Malachi in preparation for this sermon. Don't be impressed. Isaiah clocks in at 65 chapters. Malachi has only four, and they're short ones. But this guy sure knew how to pack a lot of prophetic retribution into very few verses. I'm imagining a younger Malachi sitting in freshman composition class for prophecy majors as the professor slaps the first draft of a term paper onto his desk and snarls, "Twice as much divine outrage. Half as long." Well, Malachi sure got the message.

Wasting no time at all on pleasantries, he comes on strong in chapter one, railing at the priests... Actually, let me adjust that. The first thing you learn in Prophecy Comp 101 is how to use the divine first person. That is, you learn how to write in the voice of God. So, God is the one railing at the priests as the book of Malachi begins, saying they've polluted God's altars and despised God's name by sacrificing livestock that is blind or lame or otherwise blemished by the ritual standards of the day. "Try presenting that to your governor," says a very indignant God. "Do you think he'd stand for these second rate rams and bullocks? I want your best. And if you won't listen to me, I'll not only curse you, I'll curse your blessings, rebuke your offspring and spread the dung of your worthless offerings on your faces!" Look it up. It's in the Bible. Scholars tell us that some parts of holy scripture are eschatological in nature. They don't dwell so much on the scatological parts, but there you have it.

What in the world are we to do with a scene like this one? Could it offer anything helpful at all to our conception of God? Especially when there are dozens of places in the Hebrew Scriptures that contradict it? Passages where God says just as clearly, "I don't care about your offerings. Do you think I need the blood of bulls to survive? I just want you to live lives of justice and mercy and lovingkindness."

So, what gives? Which God is the real God? We probably need to know. Especially if this God is going to send a messenger who will be like a refiner's fire, to burn away all that is impure in our lives. See why no one's written a song about Advent being "the most wonderful time of the year"?

At the heart of Malachi's complaint is covenant faithfulness. Or rather, covenant unfaithfulness on the part of the Hebrew clergy in particular. And we can't enter the world of Malachi, or the world of John the Baptist and Zachariah and Elizabeth and Jesus, for that matter, without appreciating what covenant faithfulness was about.

The central Hebrew covenant took the form of the Law, handed down to Moses on Sinai. But there are others. Earlier ones, even. Like the covenant God made with

Noah and all creatures after the flood, when God laid down God's bow, God's weapon, in the sky as a sign of a covenant never to do such a terrible thing again.

It's possible that our conception of a covenantal relationship is one of conditional love or conditional commitment. You keep up your side of the bargain and I'll keep up mine. But that's not the essence of Biblical covenant living. In fact, it's just the opposite. As Ellen Davis put it — whom you really do need to come hear preach at next year's Lenten Preaching series. She's splendid. As Ellen Davis put it, "...covenant relationship is based on love that transcends self-interest on either side. At least, covenant is based on God's offering of such love and desire for a reciprocal response from us, and also on human aspiration to love God thus — even if that aspiration is unstable." She said, for instance, in the book of Job, it's the Satan who tries to prove that there is no such thing as selfless love. He claims Job only loves God for what Job can get from God. But covenantal life isn't based on transactional love, which isn't love at all, of course. The covenant was that God and Israel would love, not for their own sakes, not for what they could get from the other, but that they would love purely for the sake of the beloved. God loving Israel for the sake of Israel. And Israel, to the extent that they could, loving God only for the sake of God. Everything in the covenant only mattered insofar as it made space for that kind of non-transactional love possible.

So, when we come upon a prophet like Malachi, who is ranting about a broken covenant, a prophet who, frankly is using the vocabulary of the Captain Underpants books our son used to love when he was nine, consider this possibility. If you walk into a room where someone is throwing dishes and cursing a blue streak, it may not be because the two people involved in the spat hate each other. It may be because their love opened them up to the deepest kind of hurt when the commitment they made to love in some unconditional, risky way, was betrayed.

A few weeks ago, Ardelle and I decided we needed a feel-good movie and watched "Moonstruck" for the first time in decades. Do you know this movie? It's a love story that came out in 1987. Cher and Nicolas Cage, as Loretta and Ronny, are indescribably brilliant in it. And, since it's a story about Italian New Yorkers, the characters express their love mostly by storming out of rooms, slamming doors, yelling at each other at the top of their lungs. That kind of thing. Like I said, heartwarming is what we were after.

The patriarch of Loretta's family is Cosmo Castorini, a plumbing mogul who has more money than he knows what to do with. We see him out on the town with his mistress, buying her jewelry and gowns, taking her to the opera. Olympia Dukakis plays his wife, Rose, and knows about it all.

One morning, she and Cosmo and Loretta and Ronny are all in the kitchen eating breakfast, along with Rose's father, who spends most of the movie tangled up in the pack of unruly dogs he walks each day. In a house where ordinary conversation is

shouted, sometimes it's the calm voice that gets everyone's attention. Rose sits down, pushes her empty plate aside, and asks Cosmo quietly, "Have I been a good wife?"

"Yeah," he shrugs.

"I want you to stop seeing her," she says.

Cosmo slowly lays down his spoon, rises from his chair, slams the table once, sits back down, and says, "Ok."

"And go to confession," Rose adds.

Cosmo shakes his head and says, "A man understands one day that his life is built on nothin'. And that's a bad, crazy day."

"Your life," says Rose, her perfect calm breaking only slightly as she tamps down the years of rage and hurt. "Your life is not built on nothing. Ti amo," she says in the Italian of their youth. "I love you."

"Anch'io ti amo," says Cosmo. "I love you too." And he blows her a believable kiss.

There was a broken marriage covenant involved in Rose's confrontation with her husband. But the covenant wasn't what stirred her rage or her courage. Love did. More specifically, a love for the Cosmo she'd lost touch with. And, maybe more importantly, a love for the Cosmo who'd lost touch with himself. Who understood one bad, crazy day that he'd been building a life on nothing. Because he'd been building it on wealth he could extract from other people, on a mistress who loved him only for the diamonds he could buy her, whom he loved only for the way she looked on his arm. Rose wasn't calling Cosmo out so much as she was calling Cosmo back to himself. The self beneath all the bravado and betrayals that somehow, in spite of everything, she still loved. The self that somehow, in spite of everything, still loved her.

Could this be some small human reflection of what the raging Advent love of Malachi is really all about? Not the love of a petty God who is offended by the blemishes in our offerings or the technical violation of a covenant. But a God who loves us too truthfully to pretend things are anything other than what they are.

In the face of some truths, to be anything less than enraged is evidence that love is absent. Because true love can't not care. So maybe the God of Advent is a God who loves us too deeply to be anything but angry and hurt when we build our lives on nothing. A God who grieves when we turn from the offer of God's selfless love, and build false selves for the sake of a world that says, "Sure I'll love you if it's in my interest to do so. Knock yourself out proving you're worth my attention." Maybe Malachi rages like a jilted lover, because God won't let us settle for lives built on such fickle, conditional loves instead of on the one great Love that will never let us go.

Friends, perhaps we need the strange, culturally tone deaf season of Advent to remind us that love doesn't always look like a wish granting Santa or even like gentle Jesus, meek and mild, wrapped up in those swaddling clothes. Sometimes love comes to us like a wife who's been cheated on or an angry prophet, confronting us with the uncomfortable truth above our lives. Sometimes love is like fullers' soap and the

refiner's fire. Which is not the annihilating fire of hell. It is the cleansing fire that burns away only the falseness and unfaithfulness until all that's left of us is the silver at your true and beloved core. Because that's the self that divine love has made, the self God misses, aches for, and adores. The self God can't stand to be separated from by the nothings we give our lives to and will burn all those false loves and false selves entirely up if that's what it takes to reach us, so we can finally hear, or maybe so we can remember, a long forgotten divine "Ti amo" and be saved.