

Sermon, December 10, 2006 – How Shall We Return?

Malachi 3: 1-7

Luke 1: 26-56

A couple of weeks ago I was in my hometown of Ypsilanti, MI, for one of the longest stints since my parents moved to WI when I was in junior high school. We went back regularly until I graduated from high school; every Christmas break we would load up the car and drive the 8 or 9 hours from Green Bay to Ypsi, and spend time with the families of my mother's two sisters, with whom we were very close. But after I graduated from high school, those annual trips stopped. Then my Aunt Linnea and Uncle Don moved to the Traverse Bay area, which is at the top part of the "mitten" – so it became even harder to gather in my hometown. I still stopped in to see my Aunt Elsie, Uncle Ed, and cousins, Elsa and Ellen, but not for as long. This last trip I was there longer, and had time to see how much the area had really changed – especially my elementary school. The original part of the school had been built in the 1930s, and at one time housed all 13 grades, K – 12. Over the years it had been added on to, and the grades split out – but several years ago they had decided to tear down the entire structure, and rebuild it. If it had not been for the location and the name, I would not have known it was my school. WAS it my school? How could I ever return?

My dilemma – OUR dilemma – is that we want things to stay the same as they were before we left, when we return. But things AREN'T the same – houses change, as owners modify them, open fields grow houses and shopping centers instead of wheat or corn. Even roads get modified. Buildings are torn down, burn down, fall down. And even if we COULD freeze things in time, things wouldn't be the same – because WE have changed. Life changes us – our experiences in school, the playground, Scouts, music, sports and other after-school activities, graduations, work, moves – all of these things change us in a variety of ways. TIME changes us – our bodies change, our families change, our abilities change.

In fundamental ways, we resist change. Change is hard – anyone who has tried to break a habit, like smoking, or leaving toys and clothes scattered across a room, knows how hard it is to change that habit. Likewise, changing by adding a NEW habit is also hard – just ask anyone who has tried to develop a habit of exercise, or a habit of taking five minutes a day to tackle an overwhelming project at home – or the habit of reading scripture and praying daily. Change is hard – and we resist it. Change is the perfect illustration of Newton's First Law of Motion – an object in motion tends to stay in motion, and an object at rest tends to stay at rest.

But whether we like it or not, we DO change, in big ways and in little ways. If we are willing to ACCEPT deep change, if we are willing to be open to it, paradoxically, change allows us to return to where we were – altered, but more whole, more like what God is calling us to be. It is BECAUSE we are changed that we can return.

Zechariah changed, at the end of last week's reading from Luke. Before he had prayed, and served the Lord – remember, the text told us that he was a righteous man – but over time he had stopped believing that God would actually respond to his prayers. That's why he argued with the angel Gabriel, and why he was struck mute. When he returned, he was changed – he knew, he had the proof in his body, that God was acting in the world, even then, even through him. He also knew that the change which had

occurred would come at great cost to himself – because of the danger that would be associated with the miraculous birth of his son – but he returned anyway.

Elizabeth was changed – she now both believed in her pregnancy and in the role of her unborn child. When she heard Mary's voice, and felt her unborn child's leap of joy, she was changed – she too knew that God was acting. Because she believes, she is filled with the Holy Spirit, and speaks blessings upon Mary. She knew that the birth of her son would come at great cost to herself, because of the dangers already mentioned – but she believes anyway.

Mary was changed – she now believes in her pregnancy as well, and in the role that her unborn child would have, as the one who will fulfill the prophecies given by the prophets centuries ago, those prophecies about restoring righteousness to Israel, so that the lowly would be lifted up, the hungry would be filled with good things, and those who rely on their own strength, the rich, would be sent away empty. She rejoiced because God had remembered the promises, and the covenants, He had established with the Chosen People – and now the world itself would also be changed. It would come at a great cost – both now, because her pregnancy would have been scandalous to the community, and later, when she witnessed Jesus' tortuous death on the cross, but she returned anyway.

The Hebrew people lamented because they didn't see how they could return, in today's reading from Malachi. They physically returned from Babylon, but they didn't return to God – they didn't change their behavior. Even when God reminded them of God's faithfulness to them – that God was indeed the same – the people responded by staying the same themselves. They needed to repent, and to change.

So, how do we return? What can we learn from the lament in Malachi, and from Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary? We can do what the Hebrew people wouldn't do, and what Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary DID do – they can change their understanding of God, and change their behavior: we can

- repent of our disbelief that God will really act in our lives, and become more expectant – we can continue to align ourselves with God's will for lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, and rely more on God's strength, rather than our own wisdom, watching for the way God answers our prayers.
- Build our relationship with God, by regularly – daily – reading scripture, praying to God, and staying focused on God during that prayer time, expecting things to happen – expecting that we will be changed.
- Believe – expect – watch for – our prayers to be answered. And when we see how God answers our prayers, our relationship with God will change, and that will change us in ways we cannot even imagine.
- Persist, in the sure and certain hope that if we align our will with the will of God – and read Mary's Magnificat again to see what God's will is – that God will use even us as his change agents in the world – and that is what Christians are called to do.

This comes at a cost – I need to remind you of that. But it also comes with great joy – to be used by the living God to fulfill His will is an honor beyond measuring. And what is the alternative? What do we gain if we win the world, but lose our souls?

God WILL bless us on our return. Our paths aren't usually straight, but that is ok – if we return, God will bless us. There is a country song that captures that idea very

well, a song that Sue Sohl sent me, by Rascal Flatts, God Bless the Broken Road. It's a love song, but God's relationship with the people of God is also a relationship founded on love. Here's the words of the song:

Rascal Flatts - Bless The Broken Road Lyrics
I set out on a narrow way many years ago
Hoping I would find true love along the broken road
But I got lost a time or two
Wiped my brow and kept pushing through
I couldn't see how every sign pointed straight to you

Every long lost dream lead me to where you are
Others who broke my heart they were like northern stars
Pointing me on my way into your loving arms
This much I know is true
That God blessed the broken road
That led me straight to you

I think about the years I spent just passing through
I'd like to have the time I lost and give it back to you
But you just smile and take my hand
You've been there you understand
It's all part of a grander plan that is coming true

Every long lost dream lead me to where you are
Others who broke my heart they were like northern stars
Pointing me on my way into your loving arms
This much I know is true
That God blessed the broken road
That led me straight to you

As we follow our own broken world that leads us back to the One who loves us so much, as we follow that road to God – may we be blessed and encouraged, and open to all of the change that will bring. May we also be willing to bear the cost – with joy, knowing that we are imitating Jesus, our Rock and our Redeemer. Even so, come soon, Lord Jesus.

Malachi 3: 1-7

See, I am sending My messenger to prepare the way before Me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, He is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when he appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and He will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear Me, says the LORD of hosts. For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.

Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from My statutes and have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, "How shall we return?"

Luke 1: 26-56

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has

done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.