



## BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

### **The Presentation** **February 2, 2020**

**RCL: Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 84 or Psalm 24:7-10; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40**

#### **Malachi 3:1-4**

The Book of Malachi, a name that literally means “my messenger,” was written in the period following Israel’s exile in Babylonian and subsequent return, circa sixth century B.C. Malachi addressed a number of justice-related issues, but his book contains a great deal of reflection on the Temple cult of sacrifice and its priesthood. The theme of the Temple runs throughout our readings today. Malachi in this first text sets out a warning that one is coming to purify the priesthood of abuses the prophet outlined in vv 1:6-2:9.

The prophet’s concern for the integrity of Temple ritual speaks to the great reverence and respect our tradition has long attached to liturgy. Ours is an era that sometimes struggles with the temptation to coopt liturgy for ideological purposes. Malachi reminds us that worship is directed to God, not us, and requires that we execute it with reverence. Malachi’s is not a call to any sense of strict traditionalism, nor does it in any way foreclose development of our liturgical practices. Rather, the prophet underscores that worship is the outward expression of the deep faith and eternal longing of the heart. He calls us to view our outward offerings to the Lord as the fruit of a righteous heart (v. 3).

- Is there a word or phrase from this reading that resonates with you?
- What are the challenges to reverent and proper worship we face in our own time that require “purification and refinement”?

#### **Psalm 84**

The theme of the Temple and its central place in the believer’s life continues in today’s psalm. Pilgrimage, the beauty of the courts and the safety of the Holy place, even for the birds, are all underscored. Especially noteworthy is the Valley of Baca (v. 6), mentioned near the very center of the psalm, an indication of its significance in this particular text. (Ancient writers placed the most important points of a text in the middle, unlike modern authors who save the point of a story for the end.) Baca might refer to the place where David defeated the Philistines, or could symbolically refer to a time of trial, dryness and desolation we face on the broader pilgrimage of life.

Pilgrimage can bring challenges, difficulty and exhaustion, but the place to which the pilgrim is headed provides the inspiration and resolve to continue. Zion, the holy city, the dwelling place of God, represents

our lifelong journey to union with God. The psalmist captures the entire narrative arc of this journey, from the soul's initial deep longings for God, to the unavoidable dryness of the valleys, to the rejoicing experienced in those moments of union with our Creator. This text invites us to reflect on our individual spiritual pilgrimages and embrace where we are now, whether it be the stages of the initial call, the valley of Baca or the beautiful city we see as we approach the place of God's dwelling.

- Is there a word or phrase from this reading that resonates with you?
- Where do you find yourself in the spiritual pilgrimage suggested by this psalm?

### **Hebrews 2:14-18**

The epistle to the Hebrews interprets Jesus in light of the Israelite Temple and its priesthood. This lengthy sermon sees Jesus as both ultimate High Priest (the most significant Temple priestly office) and ultimate sacrifice. Jesus' offering of himself on the cross deals with the power of sin once and for all. There is no need, according to the epistle, for any further sacrifices.

Our lectionary text today from Hebrews emphasizes that Jesus shared in our life experiences, including human frailty, the fear of dying and the many temptations that all people face as we struggle to remain faithful in our relationships with God. Although the epistle underscores Jesus' exalted status (i.e. that Jesus is the human being par excellence), he nonetheless totally identifies with us – in our joy, in our longing for God, in our trials and suffering. As the gospels show, Jesus faced trials as he persevered in his fidelity to God and the mission to which God called Jesus. We all experience the impulse to infidelities, large and small, whether in actions or attitudes. Jesus stands ready – and according to Hebrews very well qualified – to support us in those times where we face the darkening temptation of infidelity.

- Is there a word or phrase from this reading that resonates with you?
- When have you felt Jesus standing in solidarity with you as face a time of trial or temptation?

### **Luke 2:22-40**

Luke is very careful to situate both the beginning and conclusion of his gospel in the Jerusalem Temple. He seeks to demonstrate that Jesus, as well as his family and disciples, were faithful, law-abiding Israelites. Luke also uses the initial chapters of his gospel as a bridge to bring Old Testament characters forward to meet Jesus. For example, Zechariah and Elizabeth represent Abraham and Sarah. Gabriel last appeared in the book of Daniel. John the Baptist is Elijah. And in today's text we see Simeon and Anna representing Eli and Hannah. Jesus is depicted as the fulfillment and the culmination point of Israel's long journey.

Today's gospel text provides us with the prayer known as the Nunc Dimittis, an oration still used in the Daily Office prayers of the church. Simeon also utters a second, interesting, mysterious and challenging oracle regarding Mary and the sword that will pierce her heart. Commentators since the earliest centuries of the church have struggled to interpret this oracle, and many have relied on sources outside Luke's gospel in the quest to unravel it. In the context of Luke's story that is to unfold in subsequent chapters, however, Luke foreshadows that Jesus will redefine the notion of family, and even Mary herself will be forced to

make a choice (Luke 12:51-55). Jesus sees his family to be not simply those who are his biological relatives, but those who hear the word of God and do it. According to Luke 8:19-21, Jesus' mother and brothers pass the test of discipleship, but nonetheless are subject to the discriminating judgment Jesus brought.

- Is there a word or phrase from this reading that resonates with you?
- In what ways has the call to discipleship been a sword which pierces your own soul?

*This Bible study, written by Brian Pinter, originally ran for the Feast of the Presentation on February 2, 2014.*