

Advent 1 B 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 3, 2017

Malachi 4:5-6

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

It's well known that the Reformation got a boost from the invention of the printing press. During the 500th anniversary year of the Reformation, there was a lot of discussion about the printing press as information technology. It allowed ideas to spread much more rapidly. Giving a boost to Martin Luther, and his allies, and his opponents.

What may not be as well known is that Christianity itself arose with a new technology. The technology that we call a book. Technically called a codex. You take several pieces of paper, and you fold them. Much like the service folder that you are handed when you walk into worship. Someone had to *invent* that. And prior to that, writings were in the form of a scroll. It's been estimated that only around the year 300 AD did books—codices—numerically surpass scrolls. Christianity grew up together with the book, with the rise of the technology of the codex.

Judaism to this day symbolically makes use of scrolls in public worship, and in the training for a *bar mitzvah* or *bat mitzvah*. It's important because the switch from scrolls to books changes our mentality about the writings and how they relate to one another. Book technology requires you to put things in order. If you think of Genesis as a scroll that's on a shelf with other scrolls—like Jonah, like Deuteronomy, like Proverbs—then that's one way to imagine Genesis. Genesis is one sacred writing among others. But when you create a book, you have to put those writings in order. You have to make decisions. So now Genesis is not just one sacred writing among others. It is the beginning of the Bible. It is the first book of the Bible. The Bible that most of us have is sort of chronological. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Joshua, Judges, Ruth. Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra Nehemiah. That much is sort of chronological. With some back-tracking, circling, and repetition. But then all the rest of the books are not in chronological order. They are more like supplements that go concurrently into the chronological history of the earlier books.

The point is, a book requires you to put things in order, which affects how you think about them. And one important thing to know and to remember is that no official decision was ever made about the order of the books of the Bible. There was no pope, no church council, no vote, no congregational meeting, no decision by Martin Luther. These decisions were mostly made by printers and publishers and were based on consensus and convention not necessarily theology or history.

The Jews— when they *DO* arrange their scriptures in book form— their Bible ends with 2 Chronicles Chapter 35, verse 23:

‘Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up.’

That’s where the Jewish Bible ends, when you put it in book form, which they are reluctant to do, at least ceremonially and officially.

Christianity, when it eventually created its book, put the Jewish minor prophets last, and the last of the minor prophets is Malachi. So Christians— with a book— an imposed sequence— created an Old Testament and a New Testament. And the very last words of the Old Testament are:

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

So the last book of the Christian Old Testament— and in Judaism, the last words of the last book of the prophets— are a prediction that Elijah will return in anticipation of something big— the great and terrible day of the Lord. *Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.*

So there was this vast expectation that Elijah would return to earth. Remember, unlike almost anyone else, Elijah did not die and get buried. Elijah ascended into heaven in a chariot. Long before Santa Claus had a flying sled with reindeer, Elijah had a flying chariot with horses. And he flew off into heaven. Which suggested that maybe he could come back. And Malachi said that Elijah *would* come back, and would cause people to repent and get ready for the coming— the advent— of God. And people in Jesus’ day really took this to heart. They really wanted God to do something in their lives— to throw off the oppressors, to restore the holiness of the temple and its leaders, to bring justice and peace. And they thought Elijah would return in preparation for that coming of God, that advent, that great and terrible day of the Lord.

And so,

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

So writes Luke. People were watching for the return of Elijah. Some thought John the Baptist was Elijah returned. Others thought Jesus was Elijah returned. Jesus said that John was the Elijah figure. And Christianity has said so ever since.

The Christian season of Advent is the beginning of a new church year. A new cycle. It is, in a way, Genesis. The beginning. Advent is very much a book, not a scroll. It is concerned with the flow of history. There is a yesterday, there is a today, and there will be a tomorrow.

Christianity has two conceptions of time. One of them is *eternity*, which is Latin for “no time.” It’s Plato’s notion that God lives outside of the flow of time. For God, past, present, and future exist together because there is no time. I may not be bright enough to grasp that. Plato seemed to think it makes sense. Maybe Stephen Hawking could grasp it. But Christianity also very much has the sense of *chronos*, of the time line of history. And Advent is very much that turn of the page from the Old Testament to the New.

When Luke was writing his gospel, there was not yet a New Testament, and Luke probably did not know that Matthew’s gospel existed. And I think Luke was auditioning— in some sense— to be the first book of the New Testament. Because Luke is very, very fixated on the arrival of John the Baptist, which he describes in enormous detail. Matthew begins his story with the genealogy of Joseph, and with the story of Joseph and Mary. Luke begins his story with the parents of John the Baptist. Luke wants you to turn the page from Malachi’s prediction and to see it coming true in John the Baptist. The advent of God, the coming of the Messiah.

There are a lot of prophets in the Bible. Malachi, for example. Certainly, Isaiah is titanic where Christianity is concerned. We read a great deal of Isaiah at this time of year. We hear Isaiah’s words sung in Handel’s *Messiah* oratorio. And there are other celebrate prophets. Daniel. Jeremiah. But Elijah does not even have a book.. His words are not preserved for us like Hosea’s R-rated predictions. Or the high-handed sarcasm of Amos.

Elijah lived in a time of failed institutions. He was an outsider. In a time when the political order and the religious order had both fallen into corruption and decay. Elijah lived in exile. He lived hand to mouth. And he was an opponent of corrupt kings and queens who tried to murder him.

It is no wonder, then, that John— who lived in the wilderness— and who stood on the opposite side of the border, the east side of the Jordan beyond the reach of princes and law enforcement— John was seen as Elijah. John indeed may have intentionally molded his image in that way.

In the Christian season of Advent, John’s role is to remind us that God is coming. It may be in some great and terrible day, as Malachi describes. Or it may begin with a baby, born in rags and placed in an animal’s food trough. The Hebrew Bible— the writings of the Old Testament— speak of a holy God, a God who stands apart from human institutions and who judges them. The Hebrew Bible speaks of a God who gets involved in the human story. A God who steps out of the eternal realm of Plato and enters into the real world of human time, of human history. Be prepared. Be open. Be watchful.

From the Old Testament, at Advent, a voice cries out:

“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.”*

Amen.