

December 6, 2009

Second Sunday of Advent

Malachi 3: 1-4

*"Tough love"*

Frankly, the prophet's message catches us a bit off guard, doesn't it? I mean, after all, here we are in the beautiful season of Advent, buzzing around from one holiday activity to another, baking cookies and cakes, decorating offices and homes, going down our gift lists to make sure we have something for everyone and fa-la-la-la-laing in buildings and on sidewalks. All in all, many of us consider this to be our favorite time of year, a time when the people around us seem a bit more pleasant and surely more generous. Then, in the midst of our reverie Malachi announces that the Lord God is sending a messenger who will scour our bodies and souls with harsh soap and purifying fire. Why, we wonder, can't the Lord God just stick to the bit about angels delivering joyous news about expected babies?

Mere mention of a scrub down with fuller's soap to be followed with purification by a refiner's fire is enough to chill the souls of the bravest human beings. Think about this, if you will. The lye-based soap which is used to wipe out any contamination from cloth is extremely strong. And the refiner's fire? Well, created by forced air, it is the white-hot inferno that melts metallic ores in order to bring any and all impurities to the surface. Neither of these images is in any way comforting. Yet, despite personal discomfort Malachi tells us that, in the words of Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston: "the messenger who comes to prepare us for the Lord arrives with flames in one hand and a caustic detergent in the other. He comes to boil off the impurities in our souls and to apply a coarse scrub brush to our spirits." (Day1.org, Dr. Scott Black Johnston, December 10, 2006)

You realize, of course, that your pastor could have opted for one of the other lectionary passages for this day on which to base her message. So it may be that already you are wondering why she didn't! I mean, really, there's Zechariah's upbeat prophecy on one end, Malachi's stark prediction on the other. There's little that the pastor can say other than the prophet's voice was not to be silenced for some reason. Perhaps it was and yet is that love sometimes has to be tough in order to save us human beings from ourselves, the "us" including your pastor. And this "tough love" may have to be as hard on us as a refiner's fire and the fuller's soap. Then and only then, it seems, are we able to come to grips with the discrepancies within our beings, the divisions between how God sees us and how we see ourselves.

While reading commentaries and exegeting the biblical text I chanced upon a reference to a short story written by the late Flannery O'Connor. You may remember that Flannery was a southern writer and devout Roman Catholic whose writings reflected both her native region of the country and her religious convictions. The particular story of interest today is entitled "Revelation" and is included with several others of the author's narratives in the volume Everything That Rises Must Converge. It probably will come as no surprise that reference

prompted me to head for Barnes and Noble where I purchased said book in order to read said tale!

The main character in "Revelation" is Mrs. Ruby Turpin, a southern woman who is "very" about everything...very large, very opinionated, very prejudiced, and very proud. Ruby and her husband Claud were, in the author's words: "home-and-land owners" which Ruby firmly believed put them in a class above, and I quote: "niggers and poor white trash" and also above people who owned nothing but only rented. It was also Ruby's opinion that even those who were wealthier than Claud and her might just be "common" and professional blacks who had acquired wealth and property never rose to levels of acceptancy.

Most of the narrative takes place in a doctor's office where Ruby has gone with Claud whose sore leg, the result of a cow's kick, is to be treated. As is par for the course, Ruby very quickly assesses and categorizes the others in the waiting room. They include "a lean stringy old fellow" with a little boy, neither polite enough to offer Ruby a seat, a grandmother, mother and daughter all of whom sat "kind of vacant and white-trashy, as if they would sit there until Doomsday if nobody called and told them to get up." The only person Ruby deems good enough to engage in conversation is a well-dressed woman who appears intelligent. Her daughter, however, is quite ugly and fat. Ruby quietly thanks God that she is not black or ugly or white trash but who she is. She even hears God ask questions like: "If you have to choose to be black or white trash, which will you choose?" Ruby, of course, thinks there should be other options but God is insistent. So it is that the woman reluctantly chooses to be black since being dubbed white-trash is something she simply cannot allow to happen.

Have you ever looked at those around you and covertly if not overtly pigeon-holed them? Wonder, do any of us ever puff up like Toad, if only figuratively, thanking God in our self-righteousness that we are who we are instead of like "them"? Is it possible that Malachi was sent to the likes of us?? What are we unable or unwilling to accept about ourselves?

There is only one thing Ruby Turpin is unable to figure out while sitting and chatting in the waiting room. The ugly and fat daughter of the well-dressed woman, a girl of about eighteen years of age, periodically glances in Ruby's direction in a hateful way. "Why," Ruby wonders, "does the girl scowl at me? I haven't done anything to her!"

When Ruby does address the girl, the only response she gets is yet another dark glower. This leads to commentary on bad behavior at which point the unexpected, at least for most in the office, happens. Without uttering a word, the ugly girl hurls the book she is reading, *Human Development* interestingly enough, at Ruby, hitting her just above the eye. And almost before the victim realizes what is happening, the girl flies across the table and sinks her fingers into Ruby's neck.

It takes a few minutes for Mrs. Ruby Turpin to regain her senses but when she does she looks right smack into the girl's piercing eyes and asks: "What you got to say to me?" The

whispered answer is quick and most unsettling: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog."

Later in the day when the Turpins return to their home, they are so exhausted that both lie down to rest. But despite her fatigue, Ruby is unable to sleep. All that she can think about is what the ugly teen-ager said to her: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog."

Eventually both Ruby and Claud go out to tend the pigs...to wash them down...to clean the hog parlor. At some point Ruby sends Claud to take the "coloreds" home and she takes on the hosing down of the animals with a vengeance, the girl's diatribe yet ringing in her ears. She is really angry at God and begins to rail against heaven: "What do you send me a message like that for?...How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?"

The inner turmoil continues and again she asks God: "Why me? It's no trash around here, black or white, that I haven't given to. And break my back to the bone every day working. And do for the church."

A short while later, after agonizing wrestling with what she believes has been a message from God, Ruby has a vision, a revelation. In the author's words: "A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right."

All of the people Ruby and others like her had hated and demeaned all of their lives were ahead of them in the procession to heaven. "They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away."  
(*"Revelation," Everything That Rises Must Converge*, 1956, Flannery O'Connor)

Ruby Turpin, after being hit on the head and confronted by a raging girl, ultimately confronts herself as she stands before God: "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?"

Malachi spoke to a people who had wearied God and needed to clean up their act. Though the message was harsh, apparently the Lord God deemed it necessary to hold maintain a stance of tough love if redemption was to be possible. Whether or not the ugly and somewhat deranged teen-aged girl in the story carried a prophetic message is left for the reader to determine. And as we stand before the Lord God at the beginning of the second week of Advent in the year 2009, we may be squirming just a little and asking, as did Ruby

**Turpin, "Why us? Why do you want to give us a scrub down with fuller's soap then subject our souls to the white-hot blaze of the refiner's fire? Do you love us or not?"**

**Perhaps we should be asking how we can be existing on two different plains and what it is that we are being challenged to change.**

**By the way, guess what the ugly girl's name is? Mary Grace! Could it be that tough love and grace somehow go together for all of our sakes? Amen.**