

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28)
November 13, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Malachi 4:1-2a; Luke 21:5-19

As many of you know, I am in recovery. But this might not be the more obvious recovery that you're thinking of at the moment. As a matter of fact, I also consider myself to be a recovering political junkie. As the height of my addiction, I thought about politics all the time, I viewed the world through a political lens, and I would forget about anything else happening on Planet Earth. Those who are likely still in "active addiction" were all over the place last Tuesday and thereafter, offering analyses of the midterm election and predictions of what might happen in Congress and the White House should particular conditions permit.

A few years ago, it became evident that I had overdosed on politics, and so I embarked on a "detox" of sorts. Consider yourselves lucky because there once was a time when one of my sermons could've been what you weren't looking for -- say, maybe, some public policy analysis put in light of the Gospel text for the day. Why, then, come to church when you could've just as well stayed at home and read some wonky blog or watched Washington Week with Yamiche Alcindor?

But that is the air political junkies breathe, and, over the past several years, I've been trying to breathe something different. Imagine, if you will, what a change this has been. Years ago, seminary classmates of mine would notice that my favorite background noise for studying was C-SPAN. And later in life, much of my study at the University of North Dakota focused on public policy, which is all about the ways in which laws are crafted and analyzed and who

those laws affect. Not the same as politics, but in many ways awfully darn close.

It's not that all political junkies who happen to be Christians care more about politics than about Jesus. On the contrary, they get themselves into this addiction precisely because their faith calls them to interpret the world around them and try to make it better. It's about applying Christian principles to public life. I, for one, used to serve a congregation where one of the members was a state legislator and one-term Speaker of the House, and so this application was, in that context, a rather lively one. But then there's another extreme where Christians think of their faith and their public life as two separate compartments that never so much as touch each other.

That takes things a bit too far, I think.

But one shouldn't interpret the good news with only one lens, either. As a recovering political junkie, I can recall using the political lens exclusively as my default. In seminary, one of my professors introduced her students to all sorts of lenses through which the Scriptures can be interpreted. Beyond that, we were also blessed with a student from Ethiopia for whom certain Scriptural texts had a much different resonance in comparison to that of his mostly white, North American fellow students.

That was a very effective means of getting us all out of our little interpretive bubbles...

Looking to today's First Reading from Malachi and Gospel text from Luke, it would appear that they are just begging to be interpreted through a political lens. Evildoers, persecutors, wars, and flames make us think of both friends

and foes in places like Washington, D.C., don't they? Thus, the easiest line to draw would be from Malachi, chapter 4 and Luke, chapter 21 to today's government and related institutions.

The Malachi text, in particular, unfortunately lends itself to a "good guys" versus "bad guys" interpretation, which is a hallmark of an adversarial political system. Somebody on the other side has to be "wrong" in order for us to be "right," or there needs to be a "problem" caused by the "bad guys" that the "good guys" need to fix.

Let's go in a different direction with Malachi. Let's get personal, and by that I mean let's look at what this text says about you and me. We're baptized children of God, fully aware of the old self that God burned up and turned to stubble. The old self included the original sin we inherited from Adam, and in order to prevent that Adam from hanging on, we put him to death. But that doesn't mean he'll never return from the dead. On the contrary, he pops up every time we're tempted and every time we commit a sin. That's why we're continually called back to our Baptism by confession, repentance, and forgiveness.

The prophet says, "The day that comes shall burn [us] up" (Malachi 4:1b). Not wanting to be burned, we return to where our old self was burned up...in Baptism.

Our membership in the Body of Christ through Baptism assures us that, through Christ, we can endure through evildoers, persecutors, wars, and flames -- as well as through sin itself -- without fear of our bond with Christ ever being broken. Moreover, as Malachi prophesies, there will be healing in the wings of the sun of righteousness (4:2a). God comes as the sun, whose power is sur-

passed only by God himself, and heals the wounds of sin and death. This is a baptismal promise that will endure forever. Thus, we endure in the hope that, no matter what happens to us on Earth, we are joined to Christ by a bond so strong that no one or no thing can break it.

And in the meantime, there will be healing -- if not now, eventually. If we're marred by sin, death, and the old Adam, we can be assured that God is tending to those wounds and restoring us to spiritual good health...because God sees us returning to our Baptism with a sincere desire to renew the covenant he made with us, namely, that he would be faithful to us as long as we live in trust and hope. Furthermore, the wounds caused by sin that separate people through fear, anger, and malice will find themselves bound up by the love that Christians extend toward one another. By necessity, the personal must become corporate.

A very eloquent guide to baptismal renewal doesn't mention Baptism at all; it's actually one of my favorite quotes from the philosopher Bernard Lonergan. It goes like this: "Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change." I interpret Lonergan thus: Have a sense of who you are and whose you are, don't walk around like you're half asleep, use your noggin, do what is right, and, if that doesn't work, amend your procedures as needed. That's how Christians who've burned up their old selves behave. By returning to the waters of Baptism, you don't necessarily make yourself perfect, but you deliberately seek a better way...a way to avoid sin, a way to renew your hearts and minds, and a way to strengthen the bond that God made with you.

Or, as Lonergan would put it, "If necessary, change." Pursue the alternative

to the old self that God puts before you...

For me, that's the centerpiece of this recovering political junkie's detox program (as well as of my other path of recovery). It encompasses renewal of my baptismal covenant and the incineration of my old self's inclination toward fear, anger, and malice. And maybe -- before everyone goes completely off the rails -- someone might join me.

That is the hope to which I cling, because God's hand still guides humankind, even when the old Adam rears his ugly head. God will always call his sinful children to repentance, his addicted children to recovery, and his divided children to unity. And God's mercy will never cease to be upon them.

Amen.