

**Sermon Title:** “To Those Who Sit in Darkness—Light!”

**Text:** Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79

**Preached At:** Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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**Date:** December 9, 2012/2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

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Last night as our family was settling in for a quiet evening after a day full of soccer and basketball and piano recitals, Christmas music was playing in the background. Among the many familiar tunes we heard was Michael Bublé singing, “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas.”

As I listened to the song, I wondered: What *does* Christmas look like in December 2012?

I’ve been mulling this question over quite frequently as we drive about over the last few weeks.

One easy answer is that Christmas looks very bright and colourful!

Many of you have undoubtedly noticed some fairly elaborate Christmas light displays around the city over the last little while. Some are even choreographed to music. Nicholas told me last week that one house in particular has an FM radio station tuned to their light show for a fixed amount of time each day!

Earlier this week, the kids and I made our own modest contribution to the Christmas spectacle—a few strings of white lights across the bushes and the balcony. Nothing too elaborate, but it was a lot of fun ☺.

I *like* the colour and the light of the Christmas season. I *like* the Christmas carols playing in the shops and the coffee shops. I like that the month of December feels *different* than the rest of the year.

But, I must confess that I have *also* always had a bit of an ambivalent relationship with the whole Christmas light and decoration phenomenon.

Like many people, part of me resists all of the hype and the glitz and the over-commercialization of the Advent/Christmas season. So much of this time of year seems to be centered on consumption and greed and people spending more than they have.

I have also resented the fact that our culture is quite willing—eager, even!—to abandon any formal connection between this season and the Christian narrative.

Advent has historically been a season of waiting and acknowledging our need, longing for the light of hope to break into the darkness. Instead, from the end of November to the beginning of January we have one big cheery colour and light show!

I'm not really one for catchy slogans like "Keep the Christ in Christmas" but there's something true in this expression.

I have always been uncomfortable with how the birth of the humble king, born in a barn to a teenage peasant girl has been coopted into a trivial narrative of shopping till you drop, of candy canes and reindeer and elves and mistletoe.

And I am even *more* uncomfortable with the confused blending and mixing and matching of Christian and secular narratives that are so prominent at this time of year.

One lawn display I saw this week had baby Jesus in a manger with the familiar Mary and Joseph, a shepherd or two, and some angels but *also* with Santa Claus approvingly looking on with his elves and reindeer and Frosty the Snowman, and with the whole scene guarded by a perimeter of glowing candy canes, presents, and tinsel. Apparently Jesus was born at the North Pole 😊.

Maybe I'm just another grouchy Grinch (in keeping with our Christmas characters theme 😊). Maybe I am subjecting some harmless Christmas fun to a level of scrutiny it was surely never intended to bear. Probably.

But the whole Christmas phenomenon of lights and an all-knowing Santa (who knows if you've been bad or good!) and elves and magic reindeer and presents for everyone strikes me as more than a little curious—*especially* in an increasingly secular culture like 21<sup>st</sup> century Canada.

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### **Why do we still do this? Why do these characters and themes still appeal to us?**

We have moved beyond primitive stories about the supernatural, the story often goes. There was a time when people believed in God and in angels and miraculous virgin births and stars leading the way to stables, but we are enlightened modern people who base our views on logic and reason, not old stories.

We require proof. We believe what we can see and hear and touch.

Charles Taylor is a Canadian philosopher from McGill University who has written a massive and very influential book called *The Secular Age*. In it, he traces the rise of secularism in the western world, asking the question: How did we move from a culture where belief in God and in the Christian narrative was taken for granted to a culture where many, many people feel like this world is all that there exists, and that there is nothing else "out there?"

Taylor calls the rise of secularism/modernity a “subtraction story” where, as time marches on, human beings have gradually “sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge.”<sup>1</sup>

It is a story of gradual “disenchantment.” Where once we believed in a world full of spirits and supernatural causes, we now understand things primarily in terms of physical causes.

And yet.... With disenchantment comes disillusionment.

Many thinkers have noted that this is one of the main characteristics of the postmodern world. Once the heavens are emptied, we look around and wonder what we are left with. Once the old stories are debunked, we find that the stories we are left with are devoid of meaning and hope.

Sometimes, we want our “illusions” back.

I was listening to a recent episode of CBC’s Tapestry, which talked about the rise of the religious “nones” in Canada (i.e., those who checked off the “none” category when asked about their religion on censuses and surveys). One young man, in particular, stood out. He didn’t believe in God, he said, but he still participated in the rituals and feasts of his Jewish tradition. “I don’t exactly know why,” he said, “I guess I just want to be part of something that has a longer history than myself, something that is deep and meaningful.”

He’s not alone.

**I wonder... Is the frenzy of colour and lights and confused mix and match mythology of our postmodern Christmas season an attempt re-enchant the world, to reimagine a hopeful future? Or even just a momentary respite from our disenchant lives?**

In the absence of deeper, more meaningful stories, in the absence of belief in a personal God who stands over history, do we take refuge in smaller stories about flying reindeer and a jolly old man who lives far away who brings us goodies, in magic and hope and beautiful colours and music?

I wonder.... Is “what Christmas looks like in 2012,” at least in part, a kind of confused expression of religious longing?

Maybe....

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Our texts today also take place in the context of disillusionment.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, 22.

Malachi was a prophet who spoke to “disillusioned” people. Malachi spoke to the people of Israel around 450 years or so before the birth of Christ.

The people of Israel had been through a lot. They had been conquered first by the Assyrians (8<sup>th</sup> C BC) and then Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians (587 BC) hauled them off into exile, far from Jerusalem. Their temple was destroyed; their city was in ruins.

Then the Persians defeated the Babylonians and Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple (story in Nehemiah and Ezra) in 538.

Hopes were high. Their fortunes were being restored! The people of Israel would once again soar to the heights that they inhabited during the glorious days of David and Solomon!

Except that wasn't how it turned out.

The Persian king *did* allow the Jewish exiles to return to their city and rebuild their temple, but there was still very little doubt about who was in charge and who was not. The Jews were still an occupied people.

They were still a tiny minority in a vast empire that cared very little about them or their God. Time wore on, and gradually relieved them of their illusions about any return to their former glory.

About one hundred years after the Jews returned to Jerusalem, Malachi arrives on the scene.

Disillusionment has brought with it disobedience.

The priests are corrupt, injustice and deceit are common. People no longer believe that God is on their side or even cares about them. The floods of mercy that people had once experienced from God seemed to have reduced to barely a trickle.

Into this context of disillusionment and disobedience, Malachi speaks a stern reminder... and a promise of hope.

A messenger is coming... A messenger to prepare the way of the Lord (3:1).

But the messenger does not simply come to comfort and reassure. He comes to purify. We have images of a refiners fire and of fullers soap.

As we saw last week, God's coming always includes comfort and identification with the human condition, *as well as* judgment.

Things need to change. Look at verse 5. We have,

- sorcery and adultery
- false witness
- those who oppress their workers
- those mistreat the widow, the orphan, the alien

This whole package is portrayed as a failure to properly fear, or *revere* the Lord.

The messenger of the Lord is said to "prepare" people for the Lord's coming.

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So. Who is this messenger that Malachi is referring to?

Our second text from Luke is birthed out of another period of disillusionment.

The book of Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. In most of your bibles, there is only one or two very thin pages between the last words of Malachi and the first words of the New Testament, but these thin pages span over 400 years of time.

The book of Malachi ends with a promise of Elijah coming—and in two of the three Gospels—Mark and Luke—the story begins with John Baptist, the new Elijah to make ready a people for the Lord.

It's a well-known story. The angel Gabriel appears to an old and weary childless couple, the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. "You will have a son," the angel says. "A son in the spirit and the power of Elijah... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Despite being schooled in the history of his people, despite no doubt being familiar with the stories of Abraham and Sara and of Hannah and her baby Samuel, **despite knowing that God specializes in surprise babies to signal a turn in his story...** despite all this, Zechariah is skeptical.

"How can I be sure?" he asks.

And for this failure to trust in the promise of God, Zechariah is struck mute for 9 months—for the entire period of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

His tongue is loosed when the baby is born and they give him the name John. And the next thing out of Zechariah's mouth is the song that was just read.

A song about

- redemption for God's people (v. 68)

- salvation and mercy (v. 71-72)
- the fulfilling of promises (v. 72-73)
- freedom from fear (v. 74)

**A song about the tender mercies of God, overflowing like a river overflows its banks, coming from heaven to shine on those accustomed to darkness and death—and disillusionment and disenchantment?—to guide their feet on to the path of peace (v. 76-79).**

This song is the culmination of a long period of waiting in the darkness, of groaning, hoping, pleading for God to act.

And now, the new Elijah is coming to prepare a people for the Lord's coming.

To proclaim repentance. To proclaim freedom.

To proclaim mercy.

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This is the hope that pulls us along this Advent season (and throughout the year).

To those who sit in darkness—whether an embattled Jewish minority fighting against sin and impatience and resignation, struggling to keep the faith...

... or to a childless old couple who can't quite believe the good news that the story of their people is about to turn a corner through a child...

... or to postmodern Canadians who sometimes find it hard to believe, who patch together hopeful Christmas stories full of light and colour and magical characters to cling to...

**To all who sit in darkness... Whenever, wherever, however. Light has come.**

Do we believe this?

Or have we, too, grown weary of waiting for God to act? Maybe it the illness of a loved one... maybe it is a fractured relationship... maybe it is a frustrating job... Maybe it is the sense of loss associated with aging... Maybe it is the loneliness associated with being far from those we love... Maybe it is just a vague uncertainty and unease about the future...

Whatever the cause, we are familiar with longing. We know that disillusionment can set in.

Wherever we find ourselves, the call to us this Advent season is the same as it was to the people of Israel languishing under Persian rule four hundred years before Christ, and it is the same as it was to the weary ears who first heard Zechariah's song of praise.

Repent. Believe. Hope. Seek purity and uprightness, even when the light isn't obvious and when disillusionment creeps in.

Prepare for the Lord who comes both as our comforter and as our judge who loves us too much to leave us as we are, in our sin and our confusion.

Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly.

Wait well, for your king has come and will come again.

God is not dead, nor does he sleep, the old song goes ("I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day").

This is truly good news, full of hope, overflowing with mercy.

***We must also continue to tell this story.***

Tell it to ourselves when we don't feel very hopeful.

Tell it in a culture starving for hope, desperately searching for a re-enchanted world full of meaning and surprise and possibility.

Name the hope that all of our lights and trees Santas and elves and mix and match lawn displays are grasping toward.

This is our task, as the people of the Lord.

- To be prepared for the coming of our king
- To preserve and tell this magnificent story of a God who keeps his promises

Thanks be to God.