

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT, C
Malachi 3:1-4
(Luke 1:68-79)
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

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One Saturday morning in college I had a little free time and was in a cheerful mood, having had a few cups of coffee, so I decided to rearrange the furniture in the little apartment I shared with a friend. I put on some happy music, pushed the couch and chairs and tables around the linoleum, adjusted the throw rugs, re-hung a few posters, and prepared to surprise my roommate when she came home. Well, she was surprised. Actually, she freaked out. Instead of admiring my work, she turned red and sputtered, so upset she could barely speak. Which really surprised me. It wasn't just that I hadn't consulted her (which I hadn't). It was more basic than that. It turned out she was the kind of person who simply needs to have her furniture stay in its normal place. Rearranging wasn't fun for her, it was -- well, disturbing. So in the end we had to put everything back where it was before. A small price to pay for friendship.

And that's when I realized there are two kinds of people in the world. People who have trouble handling change and... Well, okay, let's be honest, are any of us really good at handling change? We might enjoy rearranging furniture on a Saturday morning, but when things get rearranged for us, that can be unsettling for anybody.

I've spoken with a lot of people lately whose lives are being rearranged. People who've lost their jobs in our tumultuous economy and as that plays out are having their plans and finances and living situations rearranged for them. People dealing with illness in themselves or relatives, doctor appointments, bills, choices to make. If you've lost someone to death, recently or in the past, you know how grief rearranges your experience. How the empty space that's left behind pulls at you, as you move through that long process of working through the changes brought by the loss. Even positive changes like a new marriage, baby or impending retirement can be stressful. Things you once took for granted are not the same any more. Relationships and routines are rearranged.

And at this particular time of year, unsettling things can seem even more unsettling. Around the holidays, expectations of all kinds are ramped up, rearranging priorities in an unreasonable way. Conflicts in families multiply, and if we are hurting there's a feeling of being out of step. Some churches are planning to offer what they call a "Blue Christmas" service, recognizing how painful this time of year can be, assuring all of us that there's more to this season than false jolliness, that the steady love of God supports us, that God's gentle gifts of peace and patience sustain each one of us through all the changes and chances. Christ is our still point in the storm.

This morning, into our tumultuous stream of life comes the Word of God, the voice of our Savior. Today's scriptures are all about things being rearranged, in people's lives and in the world. And especially about the way God is rearranging things for God's good and ultimate purposes.

Malachi speaks of God as a refiner's fire, burning metals with intense heat to remove impurities. Malachi also pictures God as fuller's soap, scrubbing the stains out of wool to leave the fibers clean and pure. God is not content with the way things are, but bent on refining and cleansing God's people. It sounds rigorous, and it is. God is out to rearrange things, to take God's people as they are and make something even better out of them. A people fit to serve God's high mission. A people ready to bring God's salvation to all the nations of the earth.

John the Baptist, too, calls God's people to "repent for the forgiveness of sins." He calls God's people to take stock of their lives, clean house and let God rearrange things within them, to prepare the way for Messiah to enter their lives.

And John promises that God is rearranging heaven and earth, rearranging mountains and valleys to create an enduring relationship to connect God with all people. John speaks of God raising up every valley and leveling out every hill, creating a beautiful path, wide and clear and smooth enough for anyone and everyone to travel. It's really a picture of God preparing the pathway of salvation. God rearranging the landscape of history to make a way for all people to walk with God.

In Advent what we're called to do is cooperate with God's great and wonderful mission of rearrangement. To let God rearrange us. Because God's goal is to reshape all creation to reflect God's image, to empower all of us to reflect the love and strength and compassion of Jesus. God is always working in us to refine and cleanse us, to arrange things in a more Christ-like way. God keeps on leading us further into ways of peace and generosity and courage, sacrifice and justice and joy. God continually prepares God's way in us, so God's life and love can be more fully expressed through us.

But, God never forces the change. God doesn't manipulate anyone. Instead, God operates through hints and stirrings. And Advent is the time to attend to the hints and stirrings of God in our lives. Often, God works through Christian friendships and community to suggest ways for us to respond and grow. God works through others, their words and examples. God nudges us along the way. And gradually, lovingly, with forgiveness and tender mercy, God shapes us into the people God would have us be.

What would it look like to let God rearrange us? Often it looks like trust in the face of anxiety. It looks like openness in the midst of confusion. It looks like patient, waiting hope, in times when hope is hard to come by.

I have a friend who's right in the middle of getting rearranged. What she will become is yet to be seen. Her job is dwindling away, her husband is trying out a new line of work, her children are growing and changing, with new parenting challenges at every stage of development. My friend doesn't know what will come next, or exactly what decisions or choices to make to move ahead wisely and faithfully.

But she does know about prayer. And she does know about seeking faithful friends. Friends who can listen and help her trust that God will make a way where there is no way. Who can remind her that she's a beloved child of God, claimed and treasured and cherished by God. Who can say as Saint Paul said, "I am confident that God who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." That no matter how confused you may be, you are part of God's great, loving, redeeming work, and God's work will be completed in you and in all of us.

My friend is living the experience of Advent waiting. Which is about letting God do what God will do with us. Listening prayerfully. Greeting each day thankfully. Being grateful for small gifts. And placing our trust in the God whose being extends far beyond our moments of uncertainty. It doesn't mean everything will turn out perfectly, or that there won't be danger, for us or others, but that we are open for Christ to be born in us, and be reborn in us, that we may become more fully the people God has created us to be. So we can live out our proper place in what God is making happen on earth.

Advent waiting is a time to stay centered most of all in who we are as children of God. That requires resisting the craziness of what people call the "holiday season," which wants to rearrange us in its own crazy-making ways.

Another friend of mine has shared her strategy for faithfully simplifying during December. She suggests taking a prayerful look at each of those many tasks that seem to be required of us, and choosing only those activities that truly help us to live out our central values of faith. Out of all those many expectations -- the decorating, the shopping, the entertaining... -- do only those things that help us express our identity as God's people.

So-- If sending Christmas cards is something that helps you love others more fully, the way Christ would have us love -- then go for it. But if those cards have become an oppressive formality, let them go. Plan to send greetings some other time when you're more free to express your friendship and love in a genuine way.

And giving presents... Does the way you practice gift-giving reflect your truest values? If so, wonderful. But if it's not a good fit, if you sense you're getting too caught up in the commercial Christmas machine, then by all means let things be rearranged. Make plans to give presents in a way that better expresses your convictions and values as a person of faith. Give handmade gifts, give your time, give to a charity in the name of a friend.

If it's too late to make changes this year, then think about next year. The good news is, we are all God's work in progress. God isn't finished with any of us yet. And God's not giving up on any of us anytime soon.

So let us be open to God rearranging us, in these weeks and throughout our lives. At any given moment, there are some things God is tearing down in us to make way for something new. Attitudes, actions, influences God would have us leave behind. And at any given moment, there are things God is building up in us. Faithful perspectives. Loving intentions. A strength of spirit to keep on keeping on, in the confidence that we are loved by God, forgiven and cherished and precious forever. And that we are never alone. God is preparing God's way in us. Thanks be to God. Amen.