

North Kildonan United Church

5th December 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Malachi 3: 1-4

Luke 3: 1-6

O God, beginning and end, by whose command time runs its course: bless our impatience, perfect our faith, and, while we await the fulfillment of your promises, grant us hope in your Word. Amen.

More than a few years back a friend introduced me to the writings of Malcolm Guite, a contemporary English Anglican priest and poet. His work is profound and his use of language beautiful. As I was struggling to put together this sermon I turned to his collection of poems entitled Waiting on the Word, A poem a day for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. His introduction to these poems I found very helpful. He writes:

“Advent is a paradoxical season: a season of waiting and anticipation in which the waiting itself is strangely rich and fulfilling, a season that looks back at the people who waited in darkness for the coming light of Christ and yet forward to a fuller light still to come and illuminate our darkness. Advent falls in winter, at the end of the year, in the dark and cold, but its focus is on the coming of light and life, when the Ancient of Days becomes a young child and says, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ Perhaps only poetry can help us fathom the depths and inhabit the tensions of these paradoxes.”

He continues: *“The Latin root of the familiar word ‘Advent’ is veni. It speaks of ‘coming’, the coming of Christ in every way.”*

I find his words helpful in this season, helpful in grounding me in the fullness of Advent, in the promise of Advent.

For centuries Christians have begun their Advent journey with the poetry and promise of this prayer, the Collect or prayer for the First Sunday of Advent.

“Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility; that on the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.”

Such a perfect summing up of the Advent themes. We hear of the coming of Christ in the manger of Bethlehem: *“came to us in great humility”*. Then the prayer jumps across time to the fulfillment and finality of all things at Christ’s second coming: *“when he shall come again in his glorious majesty”*.

The birth of Christ. The return of Christ. These two advents frame the in-between time in which we live. And yet, within this beginning and this end Christ continually comes to us, in our encounters with the poor and the stranger, in the love and

compassion we show our neighbour, in the welcoming waters of baptism, in the bread broken and the cup shared, in the Word heard and proclaimed, in our own need, Christ comes to us.

One more Malcolm Guite quote. I had never thought of this point he makes. He says: "*...the other sense we have of the word 'advent' is to find it beginning the word 'adventure'. The knights in Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur say to one another, 'Let us take the adventure that God sends us', recognizing that the God in whom we live and move and have our being may come and meet us when and where he pleases, and any door may be the door to the 'chapel perilous'.*"

I have been quoting Malcolm's text but not his poetry. Let's correct that. An ancient Christian tradition is the reciting of the seven Advent prayers known as the O Antiphons. We know them as the first hymn in Voices United, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* and our choir has been singing these verses to help bring us into our time of Advent worship.

One of the O Antiphons is this prayer: "*O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from one end to the other mightily, and sweetly ordering all things: Come and teach us the way of prudence.*"

Hear Malcolm's sonnet on this text.

*I cannot think unless I have been thought,
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken.
I cannot teach except as I am taught,
Or break the bread except as I am broken.
O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,
O Light within the light by which I see,
O Word beneath the words with which I speak,
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,
O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,
O Memory of time, reminding me,
My Ground of Being, always grounding me,
My Maker's Bounding Line, defining me,
Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,
Come to me now, disguised as everything.*

Malcolm explains his sonnet this way:

"In my sonnet I wanted to convey this sense of the underlying and underpinning order of things, the 'Mind behind the mind through which I seek...Light within the light by which I see.' Writing the poem led me in the end to a strange paradox. The psalmist is taunted by the question, 'Where is now your God?' And it's a question that some more militant 'scientific' atheists of our own day still use to taunt Christians. And in one sense

we cannot directly point to God because *Sapientia*, Wisdom, this underlying coherence and beauty, is not to be found anywhere as an item in the cosmos; it is not a single being, but the ground of being itself-not a single beauty but the source of all beauty. And yet, for the very same reason, there is a real sense in which we can point to everything, ‘from one end to the other’ of the cosmos, and say, ‘There, can’t you see?’ For wisdom is both hidden and gloriously apparent. *Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring, Come to me now, disguised as everything.*”

Let’s shift gears slightly, just slightly, and reflect on what we might see as an embodiment of Malcolm’s “*disguised as everything*”.

Two Sundays ago, we dedicated a new collection of prayer shawls. With the children around the table we talked about how a warm blanket around our shoulders really helps when we aren’t feeling well. These shawls are smaller versions of a big blanket but they do the same thing. We said they are like a hug, helping those who receive a shawl to put it on and warm up and perhaps think of the kindness of the person who made the shawl. The creation of each shawl is an act of love, knitted with the hope that it will be a blessing and a comfort to a person in need.

Then the time of blessing came. The children and I put our hands on the prayer shawls and we said together this prayer of dedication:

Dear God, bless these prayer shawls, bless those who made them, and bless those who will be given one. May your love and care be felt each time a prayer shawl is put on. Amen.

I know that these shawls do find their way to those in need, though often I don’t know who the recipients are. After that service two weeks ago, one of the shawls was given by one of our members to her neighbour, whose father was very ill. A very caring act which was warmly received by the family.

Last Sunday I was told that the father in question was Len, a friend of mine for the past forty years, and that he had died a few days earlier.

After church I called his partner Don. In amongst our extended conversation Don expressed his deep appreciation for the gift of the prayer shawl and how much that gift meant to Len. It was such a blessing to them that people of another congregation were thinking about them.

Don asked if he could pay for the shawl, or make some kind of donation in order to show his appreciation. In words which still kind of surprise me it came to my mind to say: “No, these shawls are gifts freely given, like the gift of baptism. No payment is required or expected.” Don expressed his gratitude and said that sometimes it is good to just be able to receive without the expectation of repayment. He was also particularly touched when I told him that our children had participated in the laying on of hands at the prayer shawl blessing.

I should add how appreciative I am that the gift of the prayer shawl was made. Len and Don have been a part of my life for decades, a friendship begun before I entered theological college. Don, a fellow minister, was one of those who laid hands on me at my ordination, he married my brother and sister-in-law and buried my mother, and last summer I officiated at Don and Len's wedding. So I am pleased and proud and grateful that it was our congregation that reached out in love and caring with the gift of the prayer shawl. On their behalf, on my behalf, thank you to all who create these wonderful, tangible, beautiful gifts of love and blessing.

Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring, Come to us now, disguised as everything."