

Sermon – Determining What is Best
Sunday, December 6, 2016
Scripture: Malachi 3:1-4, Philippians 1:3-11
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

We are delighted to present a portion of Handel's *Messiah* under the leadership of Dale Rogers at each worship service this Advent. Last week we began our journey with *Comfort Ye, My People*, based on Isaiah 40. These words of comfort and hope were first spoken upon the Israelites' return to Jerusalem following the 57 year Babylonian Exile. This week, Lyle VanDeventer presents *But Who May Abide the Day of His Coming* based on our first scripture reading, Malachi 3:1-4. As the Israelites began to rebuild their life and the temple following their homecoming, prophets remind them of the need to reform and prepare for the coming of God, who expects nothing less than purity and integrity from those who lead God's people. May our hearts and minds be open to the hearing and understanding of these ancient Hebrew Scriptures.

1 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to God's temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, God is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of God's coming, and who can stand when God appears? For God is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; 3 God will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and God will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. Amen.

As Malachi shouts from the mountaintop his prophecy that God is a refining fire, Paul whispers from prison his prayer that God will help Philippian Christians to become pure and blameless. Paul's depiction of these two virtues does not preclude impurity. Rather Paul paints a picture in his prayer of active love, the beginning point toward purity and blamelessness and the catalyst for unified community. (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, pg. 39) Our second scripture reading is Philippians 1:3-11. Hear now God's holy word.

3 I thank my God every time I remember you, 4 constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, 5 because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. 7 It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. 9 And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10 to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, 11 having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

The title of the sermon: Determining What is Best

Text: "...to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless..." Philippians 1:10

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, give us the discipline and courage to refine our minds, hearts and spirits as we prepare to meet you anew this season of Advent. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

This past Thursday, Trajan, Hannah and I concluded a discussion on a book I gave each of them as we began our journey together as your pastors. The book by executive coach Bruna Martinuzzi is called *The Leader as Mensch: Become the Kind of Person Others Want to Follow*. She begins with a story about the first time she learned the meaning of the word mensch.

It was in the early 1950s in Cairo, Egypt where she lived with her family. A neighbor and good friend was visiting as he did most evenings. On that particular evening, however, there was something different about his behavior. He was quieter than usual and when he left to go downstairs to his apartment, he gave each of them a warm hug, which seemed out of the ordinary.

The next morning, her mother announced she wanted to check to make sure their friend was okay. Bruna accompanied her parents to find the door of his apartment slightly ajar. When they walked in everything seemed to be in place, however they knew he had left for good and likely fled the country. This was not uncommon for many Jews of that era who, fearing repercussions from local authorities, felt compelled to leave without attracting attention to themselves or the friends who stayed behind. Their friend knew her parents might be questioned and that not knowing was for their protection.

They discovered several small pieces of paper, each with their nickname on it and a special gift, subtly marked. He left Bruna the leather bound dictionary with his gold engraved initials, her mother a lovely carved, serving bowl and her father his valued Meerschaum pipe. By wanting to protect them, he was noble to his very last gesture. That morning, Bruna's father said, "He was a Mensch."

Mensch is a German word meaning human being or person. It has no gender. In Yiddish, a mensch is a person of integrity and honor, an upstanding and decent individual, with admirable characteristics such as humility, authenticity, accountability, dependability, generosity, composure and appreciation... to name a few.

The Prophet Malachi might say that a mensch is one who has been refined, like gold and silver or cleansed repeatedly with Fuller's soap. The Apostle Paul might say that a mensch is one who is pure and blameless or who has the ability to determine what is best.

Today we long for persons of integrity in positions of leadership, not unlike Malachi who looked for mensch-like qualities within the priesthood as the Israelites struggled to rebuild their lives in the days following the Babylonian exile, or Paul who prayed with thanksgiving for the mensches who stood by him during his imprisonment for his faith in Christ and who led the early church.

One is not born a mensch, one becomes mensch-like by the grace of God and through repetitive acts which form habits and a way of being. One is not born a mensch, one becomes mensch-like when one has the opportunity to live within a loving faith community and learn from those who model what it is to be a mensch. One is not born a mensch, one becomes mensch-like when one has the courage to see one's reflection clearly (as in refined silver), to learn from one's mistakes and to make different choices along the way.

Malachi's choice of refining silver is a powerful illustration in the importance of repetition in our lives. Repetition or iteration is something one does over and over to derive the benefits of the process in a progressive way. Our faith is nourished through repetitive acts of worship, prayer, stewardship and service to others. Just as the body needs regular exercise and a balanced diet to remain healthy and strong, our spirits need regular exercise in prayer, community and worship to be pure and blameless.

One of the greatest joys I have as your pastor is joining Hannah and Trajan in remembering each of you in prayer throughout the year. Last week we began our third cycle of praying for members in this historic chancel given by Robert Todd Lincoln, with candles lit and hearts overflowing with thanksgiving for the gifts and generosity among us and the rich history we share as members of Westminster.

This advent season may we not forget that we are a people reformed and always reforming. May we honor the repetitive tasks within our lives that strengthen our bodies, refine our spirits and prepare us to determine what is best as we celebrate once again the story of Emmanuel: God with us. May we seek to fuse form and substance in our worship, words and actions in the living of our lives. It is not enough, after all, to go through the motions of our traditional Christmas pageantry, beautiful though they may be.

After the first presentation of the **Messiah** in London in 1741, George Frideric Handel wrote to a friend: "I should be sorry if I only entertain them. I wished to make them better." (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, pg. 30) Both composer and mensch, Handel challenges us to go beyond feeling good to doing good. *Preparing the way* for the Messiah calls us to reach out to the world's needs just as God has reached out to us in Jesus Christ.

Indeed God is coming, says the Lord of Hosts. Will we be able to stand when God appears? Come, thou long expected Jesus, come! Amen.