

**Series: The Minor Prophets**

**Today: Back to Basics**

**Text: Malachi 2:4-9**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Alicia Conklin-Wood**

**Sunday, August 31, 2008**

**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

This morning brings us to the little book of Malachi, the final in this summer's series on the minor prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is also the final book in the collection of the Twelve Prophets. Malachi, whose name means "my messenger", probably lived sometime between 500-430 BCE, the post-exilic period.

Because of its position, in modern Jewish Bibles it's often called the Seal of the Prophets. Likewise, because it's just before the book of Matthew, Christians sometimes call Malachi the "skirt and boundary" of the New Testament. The lectionary readings only use the book once in Advent, compared to the numerous times of other prophets, such as Isaiah.

We know little about the author's background, or even the specific situation he was addressing. It's clear that Malachi was upset with the laxity, corruption, unfaithfulness and indifference that he saw in religious life around him, (especially with the priests) but he wasn't giving up. It's a harsh word-except for the constant theme of God's care, love, and persistent relationship, and the sense that this messenger of God's word really felt there was still hope for the people to whom he spoke.

Eckhart Tolle a modern spiritual writer reflects his concerns about today's religious life that remind me of Malachi's fundamental concerns: *Some of these forms [of religious practices]... have become so overlaid with extraneous matter that their spiritual essence has become almost completely obscured by it. To a large extent, therefore, their deeper meaning is no longer recognized and their transformative power is lost<sup>1</sup>.* Among other things Tolle refers to worship rituals that have lost their original meaning and/or are observed in form but without the spiritual impact they once had. You might name one or two for yourself, out of your own church experiences somewhere. Maybe it caused you to look for a new faith community; maybe it brought you to FPC.

Malachi used some very different literary approaches in writing his oracle. He used uncommon stories- like the story of Jacob and Esau in place of the more familiar exodus story, and the somewhat obscure, though beautiful,

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<sup>1</sup> [The Power of Now](#), p 6

covenant of Levi. Malachi asked a lot of questions- 23 questions in 55 verses. God asked questions; the priests asked questions; Malachi asked questions. No one ever asked questions like he did! These two unusual approaches invite us to get back to basics by “thinking outside the box”. Malachi, God’s messenger, invites us to recover the core of our faith, by exploring a different path than usual- the Wisdom Way of Knowing, a subject that I’ve been intrigued with and reading about for several months. So, with Malachi’s permission and yours, here are just a few highlights of this fresh approach.

Let’s begin with a parable about “acornology”.

*Once upon a time, in a not-so-faraway land, there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree. Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernize acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy; and since they were midlife, baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses. There were seminars called “Getting All You Can out of Your Shell”. There were woundedness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall from the tree. There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.*

*One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped “out of the blue” by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns. And, crouched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale. Pointing upward at the tree, he said, “We... are... that!”*

*Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded, but one of them continued to engage him in conversation: “So tell us, how would we become that tree? “Well,” he said, pointing downward, “It has something to do with going into the ground... and cracking open the shell.” “Insane,” they responded. “Totally morbid! Why, then we wouldn’t be acorns anymore.”<sup>2</sup>*

That’s a lovely, humorous little story, but what does it mean for us. Acorns will become oak trees- obviously. But, what might we become- what “something more” than just our acorn selves? Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest and spiritual writer, included this story about “acornology” in her book The Wisdom Way of Knowing. It’s an attempt to understand the ancient near eastern wisdom tradition within which she says Jesus was a master teacher- one who invites us to go below the surface of life to a deeper place- a place that is closer to what we were created to be. It involves letting go of some of our

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<sup>2</sup> Lost Christianity by Jacob Needleman, as found in The Wisdom Way of Knowing by Cynthia Bourgeault p64-65

familiar ways and understandings of Jesus teachings, and our familiar attitudes about life.

Bourgeault tells the acorn story in the context of a chapter about freedom and surrender- letting go of our false self (or egoic ‘I’) and becoming our true self- the one God created us to be. She says :

*This “I” whom I take to be myself, this individual who moves about on the planet making choices and doing her thing, is not who I am at all. It’s only the acorn. Coiled within the acorn is a vastly more majestic destiny and a true self who lives it. But this oak tree of myself can come into being only if it lets go of its acorn. .... Life does not truly begin until the acorn falls into the ground.... The journey toward full selfhood [that Jesus desired for all people] is more than just awakening; it involves a letting go that is also a dying .<sup>3</sup>*

Does any of this resonate with your memory of Jesus’ teachings? Listen: *Luke 9:24 Whoever would save his life shall lose it, and whoever shall lose his life for my sake will save it.*

*John 12:24 Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it dies, it shall yield a rich harvest.*

These two of Jesus’ wisdom sayings are at the core of his wisdom teachings.

What dies, or what is surrendered, is what we call our false self. Briefly this involves “*classic emotional programs for happiness or: security/survival, esteem/affection and power/control-* all the things that keep us bound up. We become so attached to these things because they keep us safe and comfortable. They may be ideas or values as much as or even more than physical objects like our new car or boat. They may also be aversions as well as attachments- things or ideas we spend a lot of energy on trying to avoid, or things that ‘push your buttons.’”<sup>4</sup>

For many of us, it can be frightening to think of this letting go, or surrender that is the dying to self. Surrender has all sorts of connotation of defeat and weakness, and a good deal of early childhood is spent on helping our children achieve self control- of bodily functions and culturally inappropriate emotional outbursts, (or the desire to drive 90 mph on Rt 95 as one young woman I know got caught doing!).

But what if we thought of this dying or surrender more like what happens when we fall in love? Then there is a truly, totally voluntary surrender to another person- a thing that is too beautiful to describe. And so it is with the

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<sup>3</sup> The Wisdom Way of Knowing p65ff

<sup>4</sup> Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening by Cynthia Bourgeault p 137 freely adapted

mystery of God. “It’s not about outer capitulation but inner awakening.”<sup>5</sup> What is this, but simply letting go of the false self so the true, oak tree, person we were created to be, bearing the image of the Holy One, can be awakened and allowed to shine forth?

*“The spiritual practice of letting go, surrender, at its no-frills simplest is a moment by moment learning not to do anything in a state of internal brace. Bracing is never worth the cost.”* The stress and bodily tension of that bracing isn’t worth it. But, it’s not something that comes easily. Almost everything in our daily living works against it, and certainly our over active (and controlling) egos will try to sabotage it. And, even those who regularly are practicing prayer and meditation may find themselves yearning for “something more”, for God. And then it’s *“possible that one is summoned to contemplation. If meditation may be described as a turning from the things of the world in order to attend to the things of God, then it contemplation is a turning from the things of God to [God’s self.]”*<sup>6</sup>

We practice this letting go by such things as Centering Prayer- a practice of simply sitting silently, stilling our body, mind and heart as we are able for 20 minutes at a time (hopefully twice a day). Of course our ego controlled monkey minds want to jump all over the place and keep us distracted, so we may use and image or word to recall us to the stillness. Other than that, there is nothing, no-thing, that needs to be accomplished. *All my perspective changes. [We] do not necessarily become good or better: it is simply a question of how [we] see, and how [we] permit [ourselves] to be seen....* As a friend of St. Francis said, you *“just sit there, convinced that this patience is itself powerful prayer”*<sup>7</sup>. This centering prayer is just a practice- though it may be very useful when a stressful situation arises, to be able to touch that silence within before acting or reacting.

This state of interior surrender is anything but “rolling over and playing dead”. *“On the contrary, interior surrender is often precisely what makes it possible to see the decisive action that must be taken and to do it with courage and strength. ... Whether it’s a matter of holding your ground with your boss, handling a rebellious teenager with tough love, or putting your life on the line for an ideal you believe in like Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr., action flows from that place of relaxed, inner opening.”*<sup>8</sup> This is wisdom work- the core, basic teaching of the master wisdom teacher named Jesus.

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<sup>5</sup> The Wisdom Way... p72

<sup>6</sup> Book on prayer by Soto, in church library new books section, p197

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p198

<sup>8</sup> The Wisdom Way of Knowing p75

Isn't it amazing that simply through dying to self, or surrender, we may find **life**- freedom, free will, happiness, justice, and truth? The kingdom of God is within you, taught Jesus (Luke 7:21). It's not just for life after life. It's a "way of being present here and now that makes us transparent to the light [of God's love]."<sup>9</sup> And when we work out of our true self, we not only experience these fruits of transformation- we become agents of them for others. Then the hard work of justice and peacemaking, the mission work of the church, becomes a natural overflowing of a centered self. Whenever I hear of someone who is struggling with feelings of burn out, I know it's often more about a tired spirit, needing to "go to the well", as it is physical exhaustion. She/he needs to get back to basics to her core self.

So, let us live, not as weary, frightened acorn people, but courageously allowing ourselves to go back to basics, surrender all that is false within, and so be reborn- as oak trees, full of new life and promise

11 o'clock: [Let me close with another story that sits along side acornology. It uses the familiar image of the candle (Focus your eyes on one of the candles on the communion able):

*[In its outer ... form a candle is an object consisting of tallow and wick. But the real secret of the candle reveals itself only when the match is struck and the candle begins to burn. It gives of the materials of its outer form in order to release the heat and fragrance within. Only then do we see what a candle is: its outer form is tallow and wick; its inner life is flame<sup>10</sup>]*

Let us pray: God of life and love, we thank you for the courage of Malachi in his fresh approach to recalling people to the core of their faith, and for the wisdom of Jesus' teaching that invites us to surrender ourselves, to be awakened in his Love. As people of the covenant may we walk in "integrity and uprightness", with reverence toward You. Amen

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid p80

<sup>10</sup> Ibid p55