

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6
Advent 2 C
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Preparing the way for God's coming is so much more than lighting two candles and reciting an advent prayer. The season is not kept by religious ceremony. This season is kept when each of us comes to the end of ourselves, we throw in the towel, and admit that "it's over" as far as our self projects are concerned. This is not easy. As the Gospel of Luke points out today God's coming means filling in the valleys, making the rough places smooth, both metaphors of which hint at how difficult that is going to be. Advent is a personal struggle with God's judgment that we have so far been unable to save ourselves. Advent is a coming again to the personal realization that if we are to be clean and pure it shall be through the way of a blast furnace or a strong washing of the strongest soap. I'm sure we won't give up without a fight.

I've been reading Andrew Ross Sorkin's new book *Too Big to Fail*. The book purports to be an "inside" look at "how Wall Street and Washington fought to save the financial system – and themselves." You know enough about the financial history of our recent crisis to know that there has been lots of blame to throw around at the top. And no doubt there were some unseemly extravagances, heedless risk-taking, and many really bad decisions. But I'm increasingly suspicious that identifying convenient scoundrels settles the matter. It seems to me that we are all, in ways direct or subtle, counter-parties to much that went on. We are often the ones who were the other side of the deals, our own hubris disguised as using ever more credit or ever chasing better returns on our investments.

I found that if I could suspend my righteous anger, my political loyalties, and my thirst to find someone to *pay* for this financial mess a more human side of this story emerged. I could imagine myself in the midst of this situation trying to save *myself*. I was able in some measure to do that because I also had a personal curiosity about the story. My son worked for a Lehman Brothers company. I'm going to tell you three short stories from the book that seem to me to characterize what happens in Advent.

The first story, not without its comic qualities, illustrates just how frantic the efforts to save themselves and their companies became in those dark days of last September. Sorkin writes,

[The] CEO . . . had just gotten off the phone with Geithner, who had what sounded like good news to him:

The Fed would extend . . . a \$14 billion loan to keep the firm in business through the rest of the trading day. But Geithner added that . . . [they] would have to immediately post collateral before it could receive the loan. . . . [The CEO] understandably wondered how they were supposed to come up with \$14 billion in the next several minutes. Then it dawned on one of them: the unofficial vaults. The bankers ran downstairs and found a room with a lock and a cluster of cabinets containing bonds – tens of billions of dollars worth. . . . They began rifling through the drawers, picking through fistfuls of securities that they guessed had gone untouched for years.¹

There is something about the mental picture of bankers “running downstairs” like a bunch of Keystone cops in an effort to save the company and themselves that illustrates just how desperate all this had become. In the same way, you and I desperately struggle with our projects, hoping at even this late date we can save ourselves and not need this advent, this judgment. We would do anything to save ourselves. But we can’t. That is the point of this judgment, this season.

Things had not gone well in post-exilic Israel.² There was the temple, but there was no detecting of the spirit of God within it. The age seemed hollow, depressed, discouraged. Malachi thunders that God’s messenger is coming and he is angry. “Who can endure the day of his coming?” He will be like a blast furnace, refining everything in his path. He will be like strong soap that will restore a fabric of a very soiled, stained people. Christians hear in the season of Advent just that judgment.

The judgment of Advent brings us to the sickening realization that, for the longest time, you and I have been playing for the wrong side. At heart, that is what repentance is about. Our commitments, passions, energy, and zeal have been devoted to the wrong things. Our age is hollow, depressed, discouraged. Our investments in life have come to naught. The collateral is gone. We have been directing our lives with lies. At Advent we finally come to realize that all been a house of cards, and it has all come down around us. Our project as failed. It’s really over.

The realization on Wall Street that it was all a house of cards was not a realization that came quickly. There was much denial, a sense that that we were all invulnerable, a sense that even in the midst of panic somebody would think of something. Sorkin relates that it was after 8:00 PM that a banker made his way to the executive dining room on the forty-ninth floor. His team had spent the day trying to calculate their exposure to all the other distressed financial companies. In the middle of his Taco he suddenly stood up, and began frantically pacing back and forth in front of windows that looked out on the New York skyline. Suddenly, as though the reality of it all finally sunk in, he started

¹ Andrew Ross Sorkin, *Too Big To Fail* (New York: Viking Press, 2009), p. 400.

² Frederick J. Gaiser, “Refiner’s Fire and Laundry Soap: Images of God in Malachi 3:1-4, Volume XIX, Number 1 (Winter, 1999), 86.

talking to the room of dining bankers. All around the room, forks hovered suspended between plate and mouth,

‘We just hit the iceberg,’ . . . [he] bellowed to his men as if he were standing on the deck of the *Titanic*. ‘The boat is filling with water, and the music is still playing. There aren’t enough lifeboats,’ he said with a wry smile.³

This is the necessary “sinking in” process of Advent. Advent is that first poke through the shroud of denial, the growing sense that we cannot save ourselves, and no one can think of anything else to do.

Some of those financial firms could not save themselves, of course. The house of cards did indeed come down, and no denial could help. After decades of work and frantic efforts to save the company, no one could think of anything else to do. It was finally over. Sorkin writes,

The drive home was excruciating; . . . [The banker] sat in the backseat feeling paralyzed. Gone was the bluster, the gusto, the fight. He was still angry, but really, he was just sad. For once, it was completely quiet except for the hum of the engine and the tires rolling down the highway. He had stopped looking at his BlackBerry.

By the time his Mercedes rolled into his driveway, it was 2:00 a.m. His wife . . . was waiting up for him in bed. He slowly walked into his bedroom, still in a state of shock. He hadn’t slept for days; his tie was undone and his shirt wrinkled. He sat down on the bed.

‘It’s over,” he said mournfully. ‘It’s really over.”
. . . ‘You did everything you could,’ she assured him, rubbing his hand.
‘It’s over,’ he repeated. ‘It’s really over.’⁴

You did everything you could. And now Malachi swings to address you and me. “You are that banker,” he says. No bailout will help. Now only a blast furnace or a washing in strong soap can do it.

John the Baptist cries out in the words of Isaiah, “prepare the way of the Lord.” Fill the valleys, knock down the hills, straighten what is crooked, and make the rough smooth. Advent is kept when you and I realize our limits, and finally detect that if there is any project that will help they will not be ours. It will be God’s project, and “all flesh will see it.” Amen.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 335-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*

