



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## Malachi, Jesus and the Idea of "Enough"

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

December 9, 2012

The prophet Malachi shakes things up with this morning's reading. You will have recognized the text as a part of Handel's *Messiah* - the great aria celebrating the one who is like a refiner's fire - who can stand when that power comes? Today's passage is the most known from the short book of Malachi, however, I've been reading a new book by Bishop John Shelby Spong called *Reclaiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World*. It is the most pull-no-punches approach to how and when the Bible was written. Bp. Spong gives his unvarnished appraisal of what is and what is not worth our time in the book. He makes connections between things that most Christians have been unable to see because of the lens through which we read the Bible. He has some rather extraordinary things to say about the importance of Malachi.

First of all, Malachi is not actually the name of the author. It is the Hebrew that means "my messenger." And what a message he has. It is so much more than the Christian idea that it prefigures John the Baptist as the herald of Jesus. Whoever Malachi was, he represents an important movement in the development of monotheism - the understanding that there is one God - regardless of how many ways God is worshipped and named.

Prior to Malachi, Judaism was one of many religions in the Ancient Near East worshipping "their God" as opposed to the gods of their neighbors. God was territorial, causing the weather and the crops and all manner of occurrences. Gods were rivals, sort of a "my God's stronger than your god" kind of competition. But something happens to expand Malachi's perception of the divine. He observes that all over the world - even in those places considered "heathen," people offer worship to God. He concludes that God is a heavenly parent with all people as God's children. This is a huge shift in consciousness.

Malachi lived during the time following the return from captivity in Babylon. Those who made it back to Jerusalem came home to a ruined city inhabited by people who were not happy to see them. Quite simply, life was awful. It seemed as though God had forgotten all about them. Eventually the priests decided that it was because the Jews had not maintained their ethnic purity. Many of them had foreign born wives and children of mixed heritage. The priests said - you must turn away from them so that God will be pleased with us. You must divorce your foreign wives and disavow their children. Malachi has very harsh things to say about the priests and divorce. Spong doesn't say this, but I believe that it is part of Malachi's new understanding that the purity of the Jewish people is not as important as recognizing that all people are brothers and sisters. A spouse from another tribe was not a threat to the nation's well-being. The xenophobia at the roots of the movement to purify the bloodlines was an affront to God - who made all people. This is the message of Malachi and it is foundation-shaking for people who have lived in a tribal mentality. It requires a complete refashioning of human and international relations.

The Book of Malachi was written more than 400 years before the birth of Jesus. During those centuries the Jewish people were conquered by the Greeks and then the Romans, not exactly the kind of circumstances to foster brotherly love for other nations.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

[www.trinitybranford.org](http://www.trinitybranford.org)

203-488-2681

*e-mail* [rector47@trinitybranford.org](mailto:rector47@trinitybranford.org)



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

It is into this history that Jesus comes. By this time, the exclusivity that Malachi saw in reference to other nations was happening within Judaism. The politics of the Temple and the purity police excluded the offerings of many people who came to take part in worship in the grand Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus tried to break down the barriers that separate people. He blessed Samaritan women, healed Canaanite children, and even the young lover of a Roman soldier. In the Jesus story, it is not John the Baptists who is the refiner's fire. It is Jesus himself, the messenger of universal love and wholehearted living who will cleanse humanity from our fear of each other.

So what have we done with Jesus' message in the last 2000 years? Some of it has been lovely, but an awful lot has been shameful, full hatred, violence and division. The Christian tradition has produced beauty and stability but it has also spawned oppression and narrow-mindedness. Christianity turned its gaze to the afterlife instead of heeding the call to live in love as Christ loved us the church forgot the importance of justice and joy in the here and now.

What holds us back? I don't believe that to live into Jesus' message we have to go and create some utopian community and separate ourselves from the world. Jesus expects us to be his followers in the very center of the world. After all, that's where all of the suffering is and it is where Jesus chose to be. That's where we will find Christ in the face of the down-trodden, the oppressed, and the rejected. This is all so un-original that I'm almost embarrassed to be passing it off as a sermon. But if it's so clear, why don't we seem to be able to do it? That's the advent question. We await the Messiah who comes to set us free but most of us don't really ask what it is that enslaves us. Our Advent work of preparation, getting ourselves ready, is to examine ourselves and hold it up against Malachi and Jesus.

I'm going to come back to Dr. Brené Brown, the Professor of Social Work and researcher that I went on and on about last week. Her work really gets down to the heart of things. She pulls truth about us out into the open and dares to look at it. Here it is. We aren't able to live as Jesus calls us because we are afraid. That fear wears several different costumes but at its core, it's the big ugly idea of scarcity. There isn't enough; I'm not enough. We all have to discover for ourselves where the scarcity demon gets us. Is it money, prestige? Is it talent, attention? Is it love? Believing in scarcity makes people anxious, competitive and belligerent. Dr. Brown points out wisely that the opposite of scarcity is not extravagant plenty, or even abundance. It is simply *enough*. To overcome the demon of scarcity is to be satisfied with having enough, not more than your wildest dreams but simply enough. However, when we consider "enough" for ourselves, we then see our neighbors, co-workers, friends and we compare. Do we have enough in comparison and if we don't is it because we aren't as good or good enough? The skirmish that goes on inside of us is constant. Blow that up to a global level and nations start to look at the natural resources of some other nation around the globe, it's there, we need it; how do we make sure we have enough of it? You can see where this leads.

So my question again is, "when are we going to try things Jesus' way?" Are we ready to embrace Malachi's refiner's fire idea and see that everyone on earth is our brother or sister? Are we ready to learn to love ourselves and believe that we are enough and that we can be satisfied with enough? Can we let go of hurts and forgive?

Jesus' story tells us that there is enough, even if it looks like only five loaves and two fishes; there is forgiveness even if we betray him; there is love when we don't deserve it. What will it take for us to get ready for this? What will it take for us to believe it? Trust me when I tell you, everything is much better when you believe him, when you let him be a refiner's fire in you, burning away what you do not need and leaving all that is silver and gold

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

[www.trinitybranford.org](http://www.trinitybranford.org)

203-488-2681

*e-mail* [rector47@trinitybranford.org](mailto:rector47@trinitybranford.org)