

Date Preached	05-Dec-2021	Date Initiated	30-Nov-2021
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Advent 2, Year C

" ... that the One Who began a good work among you  
will complete it by the Day of Jesus Christ "



It is the in-between times that we often most dislike, isn't it? Whether we are on a seemingly endless flight ... trapped miles in the air between the satisfaction of destination and the comfort of home; or tangled up in a squabble between two people who are dear to us that we're able neither to avoid nor to resolve; or, perhaps most 'in-between' of all, when we're waiting for that phone call from the prospective employer ... the fertility clinic ... the adoption agency ... or the doctor's office ... to tell us, anew, how our life is likely to unfold over the many years. Even those of us blessed with great patience often lose it, a little bit, in these great bouts of living in the in-between: not due to their duration or even the anxiety they create, but because the in-between seems to rob us of all *agency*. We can't make the plane fly any more quickly ... or our friends love each another again ... or the pivotal news we're waiting for be good. With due respect to Thomas Paine, *these* in-betweens are the times that try men's and women's souls, for there is very little we can do during them other than tell ourselves to wait ... and, often, with precious little success.

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In all three of our readings for this second Sunday of Advent, a prophet—a person who has heard a special word, or caught a special vision, of God—is addressing a people who are languishing in the in-between.

- Malachi<sup>1</sup> [*sky*] comes to an ancient Israel ... returned from exile in Babylon but still rocked by its trauma ... caught in the in-between of God's *promise* of a Messiah and His actual *arrival*. Their expectation has turned into yearning, and their yearning has now yielded to despair. And in their powerlessness to either hasten or understand the in-between time of God, they have abandoned the rituals and tithe-offerings God commanded in the Torah as a way for God's people to draw nearer to God.
- St John the Baptist confronts a later Israel ... chafing under both hostile Roman rule and a self-serving Jewish elite ... *now* caught in-between the arrival of the promised Messiah and His revelation of the Good News that He bears—that He, in fact, *is*. Fed up with the impositions and injustices of a society that pays them little attention and affords them even less regard, they largely ignore God's injunction to love one another: It's every man (and it *was* only men, in those days) out for himself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> His very name means "messenger," *i.e.*, of or from God, in Hebrew. Indeed, there is some thought that "Malachi" is not the *name* of the author of this short book, but rather his status or function.

<sup>2</sup> John will be more explicit about this current state of affairs in next week's Gospel reading.

- And St Paul—whom we don't ordinarily classify as a prophet, but who often exhorts the churches he corresponds with about how to cope with the in-between aspects of faith— counsels the Philippians ... caught in the in-between of Christ's Resurrection and Ascension and His Coming Again. Paul and his converts believe that Jesus' final return is imminent—will occur in their lifetimes—and, therefore, they're at risk of growing smug and self-righteous: "We've purchased their ticket to Heaven and are just waiting for the plane to arrive ... any minute now."

We, too, live in the in-between of God just as much as ancient Israel and the first-generation Church, don't we? We've been redeemed and saved in the waters of Baptism: The sure promises of the Cross and the Empty Tomb are fully ours. And yet, we yearn ... sometimes vigorously; sometimes mournfully; and sometimes unconsciously—a yearning buried deep in our Christian souls ... for *more*. We yearn for global conflicts to be resolved ... and petty rivalries to be forsaken. We yearn for wars to cease ... and domestic abuse to end. We yearn for justice to flow like a river ... and for our neighbor to take down that patently offensive sign. We yearn for a plague—*all* plagues—to be eradicated ... and for Aunt Ellen's cancer—and *all* cancers—to be cured. We yearn and we yearn ... for in the impotence of the in-between, we are powerless to do any more.

... Or *are* we? We conclude that we are powerless because we don't possess the will, the might or the charisma it takes to lead and repair a broken and suffering world. We conclude that we have to wait for someone *else* to act ... or something *else* to happen ... because the future that all humanity, at root,<sup>3</sup> desires lies up a path too challenging for us to climb.

But the error in this way of thinking ... the error that the prophets Malachi and John and Paul seek to correct in their preaching ... is our overlooking the other, even greater source of power that faith flows into us: And that power is *divine hope*. ¶God *will come* to refine and purify this world: And our hope in that vision propels us through the in-between. ¶Jesus *will come*, again, to make the crooked straight and the rough places smooth: And our hope in this promise slays the torpor or anxiety of our worldly powerlessness. ¶The Day of Christ *will come*, just as<sup>4</sup> Paul says: And our hope in that Day will overflow us with its love and compel us to our work, if we will but seize it. The prophets all agree: The in-between is real. But their ultimate message is that it is *not our destiny*: God will bring us to God's future ... Christ will call us to greater things than we can either believe or imagine. And the best tool—the *only* tool—we have at our disposal to live in the in-between lies not in the power of our own agency, but in the hope born our faith in Christ Jesus.

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Advent is the season of *intentional in-between-ness*. It is not a fluke or flaw of Advent, but, in fact, its very *design* that it begins in the End-time and ends in the Beginning-time, of Christ. This season deposits and firmly holds us in the in-between that is Christian faith: Advent purposely mires us in the tension between the unalloyed joy of Jesus' First Advent, on the one hand ... and the unexcelled sublimity of His Second Advent—His Glorious Return—on the other. Not so that tension may torment or disempower us, but so it may poise us—*balance* us—directly in the overarching

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<sup>3</sup> *I.e.*, as a norm. I have no power to see into people's souls, and there do seem to be actors in this world who are bent either on its overt destruction or, more commonly, a hideously self-centered (and -serving) exploitation of its resources and inhabitants. I choose to believe, however, that in the very core of even such malicious folk, there is a kernel of desire for a Peaceable Kingdom ... for the Beloved Community.

<sup>4</sup> But not *when*.

Hope that is our Savior's earthly love and heavenly grace: For the Heaven that descended to earth at Bethlehem never left ... and will also *come again*. And here we sit, right in-between.



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