

### “Miss the Message ...Miss the Gift”

People traveling overseas are often amused at foreign signs translated into English. Here are a few sample messages compiled by a newspaper reporter:

- An elevator in Europe is called a lift. In an elevator in Leipzig, Germany, a sign read: “The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable.”
- In a Paris hotel room: “Please leave your values at the front desk.”
- A Hong Kong dentist announces that teeth in his office are “extracted by the latest Methodists.”
- In a Copenhagen airline ticket office a sign read: “We take your bags and send them in all directions.”
- In a doctor’s office in Rome: “Specialist in women and other diseases.”
- In a Swiss mountain inn: “Special today – No ice cream.”

These are humorous signs, however, when a message is muffed, that message may be missed and lead to a tragedy.

One such missed message played a fatal role in a sea catastrophe back in 1866. The clipper ship *Hornet* sailing up the Pacific Coast of Central America bound for San Francisco from New York was loaded with coal, 2460 cases of Kerosene and 2560 boxes of candles -- literally a floating fire bomb -- and it became just that. Precautions had been taken. The captain had posted a large sign on the door to the hold warning about carrying an open light into the hold. But the chief mate, just past 7 a.m. on May 3, 1866, missed the message in the darkness and entered the hold with an open light.

The varnish ignited with flames spreading quickly to the kerosene and boxes of candles. The crew had to abandon ship and two long-boats were lowered. Only one boat finally drifted to the shores of Hawaii weeks later with a few survivors who told of the tragedy. One of the men listening to their tragic tale of a missed message was Mark Twain whose written account of the ordeal launched his career as a writer.

At this time of the year there is a danger of us being “at sea,” because in the darkness of this world, we can miss the Advent message. It is to this darkness that the Christ child brings the light of the gospel – the message – to those who look for it. The key word for finding the true message of the season is *preparation!* Of course there are presents to buy and to wrap, cookies to bake, cards to send, and houses and trees to decorate. And during all this activity, the Church must find fresh ways to pose the familiar but necessary question: “How do we keep Christ in Christmas; how to put Christ back into Christmas?” The preacher’s task is to stir people’s souls such that they will be as excited by the coming of Christ as they are by the coming of Christmas. However, our lessons for today day discourage us from trying to do this in a legalistic way. Rather, the focus is on the work of preparation that God does. God is at work in you, in me ... preparing us and the world for something magnificent.

The author of the book of Malachi was a prophet of the fifth century B.C. who, unlike most prophets, was especially devoted to the Temple and its priesthood. We don’t know the author’s name. The title of the book comes from the first verse in today’s lesson. In Hebrew, the word *Malachi* means “my messenger.” This messenger ... this prophet insists that the Day of the Lord is coming ... and it will be a day of judgment. However (and this is his primary theological contribution) ... however God will first send a messenger to prepare the way! The identity and nature of this messenger is mysterious. Will it be an angel ... Elijah ... the Messiah?

It was customary in the ancient world for monarchs to send messengers ahead of them, announcing their arrival. That way, the people had a chance to get ready to greet their ruler in a manner befitting his stature. A somewhat subtle point here is that God’s messenger does not just announce the coming of the Lord, but actually prepares the way himself. He does not just tell people to get everything in order ... he takes responsibility for getting things in order. In our gospel lesson from Luke, this very point is personified in John the Baptist.

The prophet says that the role of the messenger is that of a refiner. The assumption, then, is that there is something worth saving ... something essentially good in God’s people. We are created in the image of God ... but defiled by sin. Whatever the extent of our corruption, God still sees something precious in us, like gold or silver ... something that can be recovered ... redeemed! The means of refinement, of course, is fire.

Advent is a time, an opportunity to “prepare the way” ... to make ready for the celebration of the birth of Christ. Often we complain about the commercialization of Christmas in our culture. But interestingly, Malachi’s message was directed to the Temple people ... to God’s people and not the society at large. The messenger knew that preparation is serious business, as well as “hope-full” business. So with the coming of God ... the messenger’s preparation was like that of the “refiner’s fire.” The image of the “refiner’s fire,” made popular in Handel’s *Messiah*, is one of purification ... not destruction or rejection ... purification.

Malachi, as well as other Old Testament prophets, foretold of a coming messenger, and the Christian interpretation has assumed that the messenger is John the Baptist. Malachi looked forward to the day when God would act to set aright the conditions of his day. John the Baptist announced that that day was dawning. John’s message has two main features: a call to repentance and the demand of baptism. These are John’s prerequisites to God’s salvation: repent (change) and be baptized (commitment). Luke connects the message to the Old Testament with a quotation from Isaiah: *The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight ... all flesh shall see his salvation.”* John is the forerunner of Christ and the Lord mentioned here is Jesus of Nazareth.

Messages change lives. The doctor walks into the hospital room and says the surgery was a success or a failure. The judge walks into the courtroom and renders a verdict. The boss walks into the office and announces a raise, a bonus or a lay-off. A spouse walks into the kitchen one day and announces that he or she is filing for divorce. A child spontaneously runs into your arms and says he or she loves you. A severely depressed teenager leaves a note behind and commits suicide. A messenger arrives with a message ... and our lives are forever changed!! Our religious tradition has always looked for a messenger with a message. Prophets, from Isaiah to John the Baptist, were not primarily social reformers or ethicists or political observers or tellers of the future. No! Biblical characters were first and foremost messengers ... messengers with a message ... messengers with God’s message.

Sometimes the message comes strangely, as in the case of John the Baptist. No one could have invented John except God. Mark Twain once said, “Be virtuous and you will be eccentric.” And that certainly was true about John the Baptist. He suffered from a chronic condition as best defined as “God on the brain.” Feeding off grasshoppers and outfitted in animal skins, living in self-imposed isolation ... John seemed to have only one companion – God! And it was out of this austere, God-possessed condition that John lived his life of non-conforming holiness. John was the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness... with his God-intoxicated vision.

Regardless of the wrapping in which the gift comes ...that is to say ... regardless of the messenger in which the message comes... my friends, it is important not to throw out the gift with the wrapping ... or not to accept the gift because of the wrapping ... or to be mesmerized more by the wrapping (the Christmas festivities and glamour) than by the gift within the wrapping. The gift of Christmas is a message ... the message of salvation in a baby boy born in Bethlehem. The message is the gift ... the messenger is but the wrapping. Becoming preoccupied with the season (the pretty wrapping and decorations) could cause us to miss the gift ... could cause us to miss the message! On December 26, we certainly don’t want to regret or be sad that we threw out the gift with the wrappings.

Remember the major problem with the Hubble Space Telescope when it was first launched ... it had a flaw in a mirror which prevented it from focusing clearly. The manufacturer’s mistake had rendered the \$1.5 billion telescope almost useless. After a five month investigation, a NASA panel uncovered what had gone wrong. The NASA engineers learned of the flaw before Hubble was launched because of a test by a “null corrector,” the principal optical instrument used to test the telescope and measure the progress of the polishing. They discounted the results of the test, however, because “engineers working on the mirror were confident that their primary test instrument had been assembled so carefully that it could **not** be giving false readings.” But it was giving false readings. Their testing instrument, in which they had placed complete trust, so much so that they refused to consider the warning signs that it had not been “so carefully” assembled.

During this time ... this Season of preparation ... the Advent message is crystal clear. Within us there is a spiritual “instrument” that tells us, if we’ll heed it, that the festivities and trappings we have assembled for the holidays are flawed. Something is missing. We have manufactured the season wrong. We launch it every year, but it doesn’t quite function. During this time of preparation, let us not miss the true message of Christmas ... for the true gift of Christmas is a message ... a message of salvation in a baby boy born in Bethlehem. If you miss the message ... you miss the gift! If you miss the gift, you miss Christmas! Amen!