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Title: The Inn: Housing the Holy – A Place at the Table

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Text: [Malachi 3:1-4](#)

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[Watch the service.](#)



We are continuing our series, The Inn: Housing the Holy. We are using this Advent season by making room in our lives and in our church for the presence of Christ in our midst, how our lives and our church can be a place where the holy can be born anew, how our doors can be opened wide to welcome those seeking shelter from the

onslaught of life. We are discovering how the prophets, long before the birth of Jesus, and long after the birth of Jesus, have been calling us to make room at the inn.

Last week Deb started with the prophet Jeremiah and today we will be hearing from the prophet Malachi. Here are two things about prophets, biblical prophets. The first is, they aren't exactly predicting the future, they aren't telling us how things will be in the future, rather they are most often telling people how things are right now. And their words, spoken into a particular time and place, often transcend time and place. Their words are relevant to most times and many places.

The second is that the biblical prophets were not very popular. Most people did not like the prophets. They told the truth about people and the world around the people and well...people didn't like hearing the truth. Malachi is writing to people who have returned from exile, who have returned to worship in the temple. Today, we might say they have returned to in-person worship. But something is not quite right. They believed that God literally dwelled in the temple and try as hard as they might, they do not sense the presence of God in the temple. They rebuilt the temple so that God would dwell among them, but they cannot sense the presence of God. And so, they blame God for not returning to the temple. It is into this that Malachi speaks the truth. He tells them the problem in them not sensing the presence of God is not that God is not present with the people, rather the problem is them.

They are not prepared

They have not made room

They have not prepared a place at the table, in their lives for the presence of God.

We have always hesitated to create a place for God. As Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem and it comes time for Mary to give birth, they are told there is no place for them at the inn. Many years before, the people of Judah, without even realizing it, told the holy that there was no space available. Here is what Malachi writes in response

*"Look, I am sending my messenger who will clear the path before me;
suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to his temple.
The messenger of the covenant in whom you take delight is coming,
says the Lord of heavenly forces.*

² *Who can endure the day of his coming?*

Who can withstand his appearance?

He is like the refiner's fire or the cleaner's soap.

³ *He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver.*

He will purify the Levites

and refine them like gold and silver.

They will belong to the Lord,

presenting a righteous offering.

⁴ *The offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord
as in ancient days and in former years". Malachi 3:1-4 CEB*

For he is like a refiner's fire and like cleaners' soap." Both images are a little frightening. A refiner's fire is the forced-air, white-hot blaze that melts metallic ores and brings their impurities to the surface. Fullers' soap is the strong, lye-based soap used to bleach the impurities from cloth. Fire and soap, says Malachi, is what you need to get ready, to make a place at your table for God.

Merry Christmas indeed! You see why prophets weren't very popular. We speak of Advent as a time of preparation, of a time of getting ready. The prophet Malachi tells us what we need to hear, even if it's not what we want to hear.

The account of Jesus' birth from the Gospel of Luke is the most well-known Christmas story in the world. The second is Charles Dickens' classic A Christmas Carol.

It's a bit strange because A Christmas Carol is a haunting ghost story. Ebenezer Scrooge is haunted by the ghost of Christmas past, his former business partner who warns him that he must change his ways.

He is urged by the ghost of Christmas present to look around and see the consequences of his greed, to see the suffering around him, some of which his business practices have caused.

The Ghost of Christmas future, which doesn't even speak to him, only takes him to see his mortality, to see his freshly dug grave, and to experience for himself how empty and meaningless his life had been.

This is the second most well-known Christmas story after scripture. Could it be that Dickens knew what the prophets and the Gospel writers know about us?

Maybe they know what we deep down know but can't admit.

We aren't ready. We aren't ready to meet the Messiah, the Savior. We aren't quite ready to make a place at our tables for the one who will soon be born.

At some point in your life, you have probably played the game musical chairs. You set chairs out in a circle and or for more fun, scatter them all around a room. There is one less chair than people. The players walk around while music plays and then when the music stops, everyone must find a chair to sit on. The last person, the one who doesn't find a chair, is out. When the music stops, there is a scramble of epic proportions to find a chair because no one wants to be the last one standing, the only one without a chair. There are not enough places for everyone, and you want to make sure you get yours so that you aren't left out. You will do anything to get a chair over another.

We bring that musical chair mentality to our lives and to our interactions with those we know and those we don't. The mentality is that there aren't enough chairs, there aren't enough places at the table, so we must do whatever it takes to get ours.

That's no way to live.

That's no way to sense and know the presence of God.

That way of living is so counter to the way of God that it will take a refiner's fire and the strongest soap possible to cleanse our spirits of that way of life.

If that is the way we look at the world, then we will never make room, make a place at our table for the Messiah. We will never be at peace, for that matter the world will never be at peace. We will always say that there is no room at the inn.

Many years later, Paul would write the counter-narrative to the idea that there aren't enough chairs, not enough places at the table, and not enough room at the inn, with this idea about the love of God. *"This is my prayer: that your love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and*

all kinds of insight. ¹⁰ I pray this so that you will be able to decide what really matters and so you will be sincere and blameless on the day of Christ." Philippians 1:9-10 CEB

I love that image, that your love might become more and more in tune with the love of God. That you might open your heart to see that there are more than enough chairs, more than enough room at the table, and plenty of room at the inn.

The child that we are waiting for is a tangible sign of just how much God loves the world.

Our response song to the message today is "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." It's a carol based on the 1863 poem Christmas Bells by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Two years earlier, Longfellow's wife tragically died in an accident, and around him, the American Civil War was raging. There was no peace, tables were shrinking, not expanding. It was difficult for Longfellow to see the love of God. It was difficult for Longfellow to think about preparing to receive an ever-expanding presence of God in his life or the world. We might say that it was a time when there simply was no room at the Inn for the presence of God. Written on Christmas Day 1863, these words still speak to us today.

*"And in despair I bowed my head
"There is no peace on Earth, " I said
For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on Earth, good will to men
But the bells are ringing (peace on Earth)
Like a choir singing (peace on Earth)
Does anybody hear them? (Peace on Earth)
Peace on Earth, good will to all
Then rang the bells more loud and deep
God is not dead, nor doth He sleep
(Peace on Earth)
(Peace on Earth)
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on Earth, good will to all."*

God is ready. Are you?