

# Return To Me

Rachelle Lyndaker Schlabach

Luke 3:1-6 and Malachi 3:1-4  
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Good morning. It is a real pleasure to be here with you and in the midst of many familiar faces. As many of you know, I live at Rolling Ridge Study Retreat Community in West Virginia. For those of you who haven't been there, let's just say we're *in the country*. Six miles back a small, paved road and then another mile back a gravel road. Well, not too long ago my parents were visiting and we were out for the day, sightseeing in the area. We were headed back to Rolling Ridge that evening, and had just started onto the gravel section of the road when we stopped short. There was a tree—not just any tree—a *large* tree—dangerously perched diagonally across the road. Let's just say the phrase, 'prepare the way,' making the roadway clear, took on new meaning that night. Returning home required making the pathway smooth.

John the Baptist, the subject of today's text, is seen as the one who prepared the way for Jesus. Because of this our text seems like a natural choice for Advent. The Old Testament text from Malachi is also one we think of in connection with this season—if for no other reason than its lovely arrangement by Handel in *The Messiah*. "But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner's fire." So, both of these passages are common Advent texts.

But the more carefully we look at them, the more we have to wonder. John the Baptist came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Malachi talked about God refining us like silver in a fire. Repentance, sins, being refined by fire? This starts to sound a lot more like Lent than Advent. I'd much rather think about repentance and sin during the season of ashes and the cross, than during the season of Jingle Bells and Christmas caroling and cookies and holiday decor. It's not a season to deny oneself. It's a season to enjoy oneself. To give and receive gifts. To celebrate. Who wants to talk about sin and repentance? (*pause*)

And yet, despite all of the warm fuzzies of the Christmas season, it's not hard to find the brokenness that lies underneath. It's a season of thoughtful giving and wanting to delight another, but it's also a season of buying and buying and buying things that none of us need. It's a season of family gatherings, but it's also a season of estranged family members choosing not to gather, and it's a season of loneliness for those without close family or friends, and intense grief for those who have lost loved ones. And this particular Christmas marks the fourth one in a row that our nation has been at war. Despite all of the warm fuzzies of the Christmas season, it's not hard to find the brokenness that lies underneath.

There are plenty of rough places that need smoothing, plenty of crooked places that need to be straightened out. Plenty of brokenness and sin.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and educator, has a wonderful little book, called *Speaking of Sin*. In it she talks about the many layers of sin and how we must each find which part of it reaches us [62]: “When I say “sin,” there is no telling what you see: the stolen candy bar, the rumpled sheets of a bed you shared with someone else’s lover, a large pipe spilling orange sludge into a once-blue river, a clutch of homeless people sitting around a fire built from trash in a vacant lot between two corporate skyscrapers. The picture will be different for every one of you, but the experience to hunt for is that one that makes part of you die.” [end quote] The picture will be different for every one of you, but the experience to hunt for is that one that makes part of you die.

Sin can be intensely personal, it can be a broken relationship within the church, it can be our entire society’s priorities with regard to the poor or the environment. Sin is all of those things.

And in a sense, all of us are at fault for those broken relationships. And at the same time all of us are also trapped in a flawed set of circumstances. We are alienated, disconnected in many different ways, from God, from each other, from the creation.

As Taylor says [59], “We do wrong, but we do not do wrong all alone. We live in a web of creation that binds us to all other living beings. If we want to be saved, then we had better figure out how to do it together, since none of us can resign from this web of relationship.”

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If you keep reading in Malachi, past our text for today, you find these words in verse 7: Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord. Whenever we turn away from the Lord, re-turn to God and God will re-turn to you.

When I worked for Mennonite Central Committee’s Washington Office, I went in and out of the congressional buildings a lot. Particularly when I would go in one door and out another, it was easy to get disoriented in the midst of all that white marble. Which way did I need to turn to get back to the Washington Office? I found that the large Capitol dome was the one orienting feature that I could always use. As long as I could find that, I knew which way to turn. I sometimes think of that as an image for my faith journey. I regularly get all turned around. When that happens, I need to re-turn to God, to orient myself, to find my way again.

The hard part, all too often, is admitting that we’re lost, that we need some re-orienting. Like a driver on the road, it is often easier to keep going than to stop and look at a map or ask for directions. But, as Taylor says: [60] “there is no help for those who admit no need of help. There is no repair for those who insist that nothing is broken, and there is no hope of transformation for a world whose inhabitants accept that it is sadly but irreversibly wrecked.”

Admitting that we have sinned means admitting that “something is wrong...and [is at the very least] an admission of our frailty: that we are sick and tired of being sick and tired, that we cannot live with this suffocating ache one moment longer, that we are as ready as we will ever be for a whole new life. As hard as such a confession may be, it is also a confession of hope—that things may change, that the way they are is not the way they must always be. The catch, of course, is that this hope begins with some acceptance of our responsibility for the way things are.”

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, translates “a baptism of repentance” as “a baptism of life-change.” Repentance=life change.

Repentance is re-orientation, it is returning to relationship, to community, to God. That is not an easy thing to do. Taylor says remorse is a lot easier than repentance. [66] “We would rather say, ‘I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I feel really, really awful about what I have done,’ than actually start doing things differently...[perhaps] our chronic guilt is the price we are willing to pay in order to avoid change.” Perhaps our chronic guilt is the price we are willing to pay in order to avoid change.

Over the past little while, I have taken to speaking negatively about a set of circumstances in my life. The other week, Keith called me on it: said he was *tired* of me being stuck in that place. And inside I knew he was right, I was tired of being stuck there too. But I wasn’t going to let him know that’s how I felt. There was an awful lot of resistance within me to really change things, to really work at re-turning myself.

But when we do choose to answer God’s call to re-turn, the results will be well worth it. The end result of all the hard work of preparing the way is that “all flesh will see the salvation of God.” Repentance leads to salvation, not in some abstract way. In very concrete ways. Salvation comes from the same word as *salve*. It is healing, wholeness, restored relationships, as described by the Hebrew word *shalom*.

Malachi talks about a right relationship with God as involving radical trust in God to provide for the people’s needs and just treatment for those who are on the margins of society. John the Baptist asked the people to “bear fruits worthy of repentance.” Those who had two coats or twice as much food as they needed were to share with those who didn’t have any. Jesus, like John, called people to repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. When John’s disciples went to Jesus to make sure he was really the Messiah, the signs of the kingdom were these: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor hear good news. These are pretty concrete signs of salvation. As Taylor puts it, they “are all outbreaks of health in a sin-sick world. Jesus saves because he shows us how to multiply such outbreaks, and because he continues to be present in them...Our full participation is required, but that alone cannot explain the results, which are sometimes so astounding that we can only call them grace.”

Indeed, it is God's grace that moves us beyond the chronic guilt, beyond saying I'm sorry, while not changing our actions. Grace gives us the courage to keep re-turning to God. And, it is a sign of God's grace and love that God keeps re-turning back to us.

Taylor concludes her book with these images: "One of the Hebrew words for a righteous person suggests "one whose aim is true." Set beside the word that defines sin as "missing the mark," this gives me an image of righteousness as target practice. Whether my arrow finds its mark or falls a hundred feet away, the daily practice of right relationship is how I improve my aim. I will continue to sin, no doubt about it, but that is not my aim. My true aim is to live as God wants me to live and—as Thomas Merton once wrote—I believe that the wish to please God does in fact please God."

She goes on: "Since I sew more than I shoot arrows, I cannot help but extend the image. It is a needle I am wielding on my way through the world...By the grace of God, I am being mended, and God has called me to be a mender, too. Since many threads are stronger than one, God has put me on a sewing team. Day by day, our job is to hunt the places where the world is ripped and bend over the damage to do what we can. Every good deed, every kind word, every act of justice and compassion tugs the torn edges closer together...We made plenty of the rips ourselves, and some of the worst ones show evidence of having been mended many times before, but that does not seem to discourage anyone. Mending is how we continue to be mended, and we would not trade the work for anything."

John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus the first time around. But the text in both Isaiah and Luke says –if you'll pardon my southern expression here—"y'all" make the way clear. The verb is plural. It's not just about John the Baptist preparing the way of the Lord. The work is ongoing. We're all to be a part of preparing the way, mending the world.

Which brings us back to the tree perched precariously across our gravel road that night a few months ago. We decided it was too dangerous to risk clearing it away ourselves. It required a community of folks, with the right tools and skills. An hour later, the task was done. We were able to return home, to re-turn ourselves toward home. My prayer is that all of us will be able to find our way home.

Amen.

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NOTE: The numbers in brackets refer to the page numbers from Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Speaking of Sin*.