

Malachi's Message

A Story for the First Sunday of Lent

Do you remember the story of the First No-El? No? It's a story of Elijah, a shepherd boy and his favorite sheep, Elisha who were the first of all the shepherds to come to the manger and see with their very own eyes, the new-born child whom the angels were signing about. Elijah became known as the flying shepherd because he leapt with such joy and ran so fast that it seemed like he was flying. But as so often happens in life, the joy of the moment faded and Elijah, and his parents Naomi and Noah went on their nomadic ways, shepherding their flocks wherever they could find pastures for grazing. But Elijah never forgot the moment when he saw that new-born whom they called Jesus.

As always happens, time passes. The years went by, thirty to be exact. Elijah had married a lovely woman named Mala and together they had two children. Malachi (which means messenger) and Miriam (Which means sea of sorrow.) Miriam was known for her sadness, always worrying and watching out for her younger brother, Malachi. She would see him standing upon a great rock and call out to him, "Come down from there! You could fall and hurt yourself." And Malachi would shout back "God is my rock, my fortress, my strength! Why should I be afraid?"

And Miriam would sigh and say, "By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept!" And Malachi would say "I have turned your mourning into dancing, and he would start dancing on the rock. This, of course, would make Miriam even more anxious and she would say "Better that you pray with these words, 'For God will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all of your way.'" And Malachi, would finish the psalm, "On their hands they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." And Miriam would sigh and say, "Oh Malachi, what will ever become of you!"

It was the season when the Judean desert would bloom and Elijah and his family along with other nomadic shepherds would make their way there for their sheep to safely graze. Malachi loved these desert times. Whenever he had the chance he would, wander off and explore the caves that were part of the desert landscape. Of course, Miriam would worry when Malachi went wandering off. She would follow him from a distance making sure he didn't get himself into any trouble!

One day, Miriam saw Malachi entering into one of the caves. She decided to wait outside to surprise him when he came out. But to her great surprise, Malachi came rushing out in great distress. “Malachi, what’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost? Or did some wild beast frighten you?” “No, no ghost or beast but there’s a man in there, sitting on the ground and leaning against the wall of the cave. He can barely speak. His voice is as dry as these desert sands. He asked for water. He has no strength. It looks like he hasn’t eaten anything in many days. I wondered if he had a fever since his eyes were burning so brightly.”

Miriam, of course, was anxious and worried. “We need to leave him. We don’t know who he is. He could be a criminal in hiding. They may be looking for him to put him to death. Maybe the Romans want to crucify him.” “Oh, don’t be so dramatic, Miriam. I don’t think he’s hiding anything. You know the story of our ancestor Elijah. Our father bears his name. Remember how he dwelt in a cave and knew the Holy One in a still small voice. I wonder if this man came to the cave to find God and hear God’s voice? But now we must minister to him. He needs us.”

Malachi went back into the cave and Miriam with him, they saw the man, so weak, thirsty and hungry. Miriam spoke first, “Sir, my name is Miriam and here is water for you. “You will drink water from the springs of salvation.” And Malachi spoke, “Sir, take this and eat. This bread will bring you back to life. It will be manna in the desert for you” And the man ate and drank and began to regain his strength.

It was Miriam who spoke. “You must come with us. Our father Elijah and our mother Mala will care for you. You look so weary. You can find rest in our tent.” The man did not speak a word but went with Malachi and Miriam. When Elijah saw his children returning to their tent, accompanied by a stranger, he wondered, “Where in the world have my children been? And who is this stranger? Of course, he will be welcome at our table, for all are welcome to eat and drink as a sign of God’s kingdom”

After some hours of rest, the stranger woke to the sounds of a family meal and the smells of lamb roasting. He joined them for the meal and afterwards all gathered around the embers of the fire to warm themselves on this chill desert night.

Finally, the stranger spoke. Elijah and Mala, these children of yours, today were angels for me. I have been living in the desert, in a cave dwelling for the past 40 days. I came to listen for the voice of God to try to understand how our God has called me to proclaim his kingdom. I do believe I heard God's voice at times whispering to me. But then just yesterday the voice I heard was no whisper. It was a cacophony of sound that I could barely understand. I'm sure it was the Tempter's voice, challenging me, testing me, telling me that I would have everything this world has to offer, if I let his will be done in me. At that very moment, I heard another voice, a whisper again within my ears. 'Know well, you are my beloved Son on whom my favor rests.'

These were the same words I heard when I was baptized by John in the Jordan and I knew well that this Tempter would have no power over me, nor would I ever let his will be done."

The stranger noticed the tears streaming down Elijah's face. "What is it, Elijah?" Has my story moved you so? Elijah, filled with emotion spoke, "Know well, know well, Those were the words I heard from angels on a hillside 30 years ago. I thought they were calling me by my nickname, "No-el" But they were announcing the birth of a child born in a manger, one who was to be our savior. As my children have heard so many times, that was the night when this poor shepherd went leaping across the fields, hastening to Bethlehem, joyfully dancing to see the new-born whose name was Jesus. I found him asleep with his mother, Miriam and father Joseph there.

And Elijah noticed the tears streaming down the stranger's face. Know well, Elijah. That child? Here I am.

And Malachi, both shepherd and angel began to leap for joy, knowing well that this was no stranger, this was Jesus.