

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa  
December 9, 2018 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Malachi 3:1-4  
Luke 3:1-6**

**Sermon: Pure and holy, tried and true (Advent 2)**

Last week I saw a post by the American pastor Nadia Bolz Weber. If you don't know who that is, all you have to do google "tattoo- and- pastor" in the same search box on your computer, and you will probably find her right at the top of the page. She is an ordained Lutheran minister from the US. She is held in high esteem by many Christian leaders and lay people today, a popular speaker and author – but she does break down a lot of our stereotypes.

In the last few months, she has been busy breaking down our stereotypes about Christianity and sexuality. She has written a new book, called Shameless, in which she targets our guilt and shame about human sexuality. She has invited people to let go of that guilt and shame, and to become "shameless" themselves – that is, to embrace all aspects of life as good, including our sexuality, in the way that our Creator finds us good.

Last year Nadia Bolz Weber gave a speech on her research, and she tossed out one of those comments that took off and went viral. She said she prayed for all the women who felt guilty about not living up to promises they made as teenagers, when they were given "purity rings". These are rings that teenagers are given and invited to wear as a kind of abstinence pledge. They can only wear the rings as long as they remain "pure", that is at least until the ring can be replaced by a wedding band.

So Nadia Bolz Weber has invited women and girls to send her their purity rings, and she has promised to turn them into a symbolic sculpture. (You can look that up, I'm not going there.)

This invitation exploded all over the internet. Apparently there are a lot of women out there who once took or received purity rings, but who are ready to give them up, as well as any feelings of guilt over whatever happened to their pledge to remain "pure".

Obviously the purity ring movement has risen out of a particular interpretation and theology. But what does it really mean to be "pure"?

In the season of Advent, as Christians preparing for the birth of Christ, we are called to pause and to ponder how we might offer our best selves and our best world in response to God's gift. The prophet Malachi called the people of God to offer themselves to God, to seek right relationship with God, through becoming pure.

However, the prophet Malachi's version of purity did not involve purity rings or abstinence pledges: instead he proclaimed that God's messenger was coming. "Who can endure the day," he prophesied, "– for the messenger is like a refiner's fire and

strong soap – he will sit as refiner and purifier – to refine them like gold and silver – until they become offerings to God, in righteousness with the one who created them.”

The message of Malachi is quite clear. Purity before God does not mean something that is untouched, or untried, it is not someone who has never made a bad choice. Purity is not about being without sin, nor never having sinned.

Malachi, whose name means “my messenger”, was prophesying to the people, saying that having a relationship with God is what makes us pure. Pure in the sense of being honest, in the sense of being real, in the sense of knowing oneself loved for who we really are.

Institutionally the people of God have always had this tendency to make our relationships with God more and more complicated. If you read through the priestly laws found in the book of Leviticus, for example, you get a glimpse of how many purity codes had accumulated between God and the people. As Christians we are no different, we have our creeds and categories of sin and ways of seeking absolution. But the prophet Malachi’s response to those layers and layers of guilt and shame was this: toss it all in the fire – he said. What emerges will be what pleases God. In that time and place metals were purified in fire, so that was the metaphor Malachi used.

According to the bible, true purity is not about being untouched or unstained by life. True purity is about living life in all its fullness, but always making room for God in that journey. Of course, we make mistakes along the way, of course there are times when we feel under fire. But more powerful than all our choices, however, is God’s ability to heal and to welcome and to delight in us. Biblical purity is about having faith in the infinity of God’s love for us. That is what pleases God.

God’s love means we can let go of the false expectation that we need to be perfect in order to be pure. Purity and perfection are not the same things. Holy purity is about going through some kind of metaphorical fire, or crisis or breakdown or loss. But it also means embracing a reconciled new life with all the forgiveness and hope / with which our Creator loves us.

In the season of Advent, we are called to prepare for the birth of the Christ child. The biblical record is pretty clear. God’s messengers and God’s saviour turn up in the most unlikely places, at the most unusual times. So we should prepare by opening our minds to the reality that our expectations will be challenged. We are encouraged to rely on God, because forgiveness is not based on our worthiness, but on the infinite power of God’s grace.

On this second Sunday of Advent we are particularly called to explore the theme of peace. In her own way, Bolz Weber believes that she **is** calling us to peace. A peace that shatters our stereotypes and prejudices. A peace that comes from knowing ourselves forgiven, and relieved of the heavy burdens of guilt and shame that have weighed us down.

It is the peace of knowing ourselves beloved of God and reconciled with God, because that is what God does.

In our gospel reading today, John the Baptist emerged from the wilderness to proclaim the kin-dom of God. And if you think a tattooed pastor preaching healthy sexuality is a bit unorthodox, then John the Baptist really broke that mold. John the Baptist entered into the most orthodox of faith communities, in a very unorthodox way, complete with goatskin clothing and a packed lunch of locusts and honey.

John the Baptist defies our expectations and our explanations. You wouldn't want John babysitting your children, or running your office. You wouldn't want him serving in your favourite restaurant or hire him to clean your house. No one really wants to listen to a biblical prophet, because they are guaranteed to disrupt our contentment and status quo. And yet it is from that character that we discover the way to God's peace.

God didn't care that John had been living in the rough, upsetting the authorities, speaking from the margins. John the Baptist's ministry was born of a kind of purifying fire - that testing time in the wilderness – and that experience gave him the perspective to focus on what was really important.

John took a page from the words of the prophet Isaiah "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all shall see the salvation of God."

God takes into account the imperfection of who we are and who we have been. And God sends us a prophet to invite us to live anew.

Where we have felt empty and tried to fill that emptiness with things that don't really nourish our souls, God sends a banquet of grace where no one goes hungry.

Where we have been exhausted by a long, hard climb out of despair, God reminds us that the way to wholeness shall be made easy.

Where we have been wounded by the rough patches, God sends holy compassion to smooth our scars and to heal our hurts. So we find welcome and peace in God's loving embrace.

This is real purity: the peace of knowing ourselves beloved of God and reconciled with God, because that is what God does. Thanks be to God.