

“Let God Clear Out the Overgrowth”  
A sermon by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones  
December 9, 2018  
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral  
Malachi 3:1-4 / Luke 3:1-6

I took on a project in my yard recently that looked simple enough. Hacking at brush, taking out some redtips growing beside our garage—  
a good morning’s project, right?

But sometimes, clearing out matted hedges and shrubs takes more effort  
and muscle than you think.

We’ve lived in our house for more than six years. And the redtips had been planted maybe a dozen years before us, meaning they had driven down into the soil some mighty roots.

We knew that.

Several trunks at the bottom of the clusters of bushes seemed like maybe seven inches across.

But how hard could it be? Well, who knew.

Had I not had a chain saw

I don’t know what we would have done.

As it was, the work was not just sweaty and hot,  
Jill and I hadn't counted on the branches and  
leaves forming dense tangles  
over the years of growth,  
so the cutting and sawing required meant we had  
to stoop and bend and grunt as we cut and pulled.

Once the brush was cleared,  
the soil, though, still wasn't  
ready for new planting.

The ground didn't want to give up those stubborn  
knots of roots without a fight.

What I thought would take a couple of hours  
ended up taking three times that.

And still, I couldn't say I was done.

This was no pottering around a garden.

It was more like a war.

My guess is you've taken on projects over the  
years that took more than you'd imagined.

That met with resistance and push back.

Sometimes clearing out the old and tough laboring  
to bring in the new takes everything you have.

It's true in lots of areas. Some hard areas.

We well-mannered church folks don't talk enough  
about the struggle some of us have with  
addictions, which can be hard, even harrowing.  
(And by the way, I heartily commend the new  
effort Betsy and David Wolfe are launching to  
help with substance issues and addiction  
education.)

We church types don't always show it, but we  
may be battling depression or anxiety.  
Our kids face off against panic attacks.

We labor under grief that hangs on even though  
others seem to think insensitively  
that by now we should have moved on.

We hide that maybe we are fighting disease.

Or don't tell anyone about our conflicts with family members and loved ones, how just plain hard it seems to get along with those we love.

Or we keep our bad habits and dabblings in less-than-wholesome behaviors in the dark.

And we don't always remember that spiritual growth demands forging new habits against the pull and allure of the old compulsions.

That growth in character comes at a cost.

We would rather that getting spiritually centered, growing more focused on Christ didn't require much effort.

We'd like inner change without a struggle. When it comes to meeting our spiritual hunger, well, we'd like microwave convenience.

If you expect in your Christian life effortless progress, if you think of spiritual growth as something

that someone will neatly package, tie with a bow,  
and hand over to you,  
listen again to John the Baptist.

And come back next week, too, when you will  
hear him proclaim to his startled fans,  
“Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees.”

There’s gonna be some chopping and sawing.  
John will remind us then how “every tree ... that  
does not bear good fruit is cut down.”

Even now, we might say today,  
the chain saw is revving up.

In today’s reading, John the Baptist is no less  
urgent about God’s persistent work in our world  
and our lives.

If you want Advent to be this sweet exercise in  
holiday nostalgia, you are in for a surprise.  
Because front and center is this lanky, irritable,  
alarming man who’s been hanging out like a  
hermit in the desert,

wearing animal skins and eating bugs.

No wonder he sounds cranky.

Over by the riverbank this unruly, unkempt figure  
keeps talking loudly and urgently about what's  
about to happen.

It's unsettling.

The Baptist is announcing, not just the birth of a  
baby but also the long-anticipated day when God  
will smooth out the harsh, bumpy ground.

The underbrush will get cleared out.

John broadcasts that a kingdom is coming that  
will mean great news, for everybody,  
but there's some preparation needing to be done.

He calls for repentance,

for getting at the deeper issues in our lives that  
maybe we would just as soon skip over.

To benefit from his preaching we have to be  
willing to stay in our discomfort zone,  
Because only there will we experience growth.

Only in John's call to repentance can we begin to  
deal with the ragged tangled mess humankind has  
made of too many things.

The sin and death and injustice of this current age  
give way to God's acting in power  
and showing relentless mercy.  
That's the good news, that's the hope,  
but first there's work to be done.

We have to sit still long enough to let John the  
Baptist's call to repentance wash over us  
and keep us at the task.

And, while you could miss it, there's lots of good  
news here.

It isn't just up to us.

God helps.

God gladly does work in us.

God does the hardest pruning, the purifying, the  
burning away of what's in the way.

For we hear how God is like a refiner's fire,  
and God is like a launderer's soap.

Now, notice that it does not say that Jesus will be  
like a forest fire, like the out-of-control blazes  
we've seen in California.

that kind of fire destroys indiscriminately.

There's nothing left by the time the time it's done.

But that's not what God's work is like.

That's not what God is like.

God gives us a promise later in the chapter from  
Malachi that he's exactly *not* like that:

"I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants  
of Jacob, are not destroyed."

God wants to clear out some overgrowth  
clean up some junk in our hearts,  
God wants to change us,  
but he has no intention of harming us.

A refiner's fire is a patient, controlled process of  
transformation.

The impurities get burned off but the actual metal  
begins to shine with a mirror like purity.

At the heart of God's refining fire is love, slow,  
persevering love.

And soap, fuller's soap.

Soap makes fresh what's become grimy and  
susceptible to germs.

But get a scratch on your limbs from dragging out  
branches and twigs, and soap stings.

You still clean out your wounds.

When Malachi speaks of a refiner's fire, of  
fuller's soap, he means we need some purifying,  
some cleaning up.

Advent is the just right time for that work.

Some call Advent a little Lent.  
We hear, this season, a call to do the work of  
making ready,  
We intensify our praying, repenting,  
watching for Jesus.

But the problem with Advent is, as a friend mine  
says, that it has competition, as a friend of mine  
likes to say.

“Chipper Christmas music ... chock full of  
chestnuts roasting and [a] wonderful time of the  
year—starts to pipe into stores in, like, October.  
Everybody seems to be waiting for something  
*other* than Jesus: for the end of the semester,  
family to come home, and vast holiday  
overconsumption.”

But something good *is* on the way.

To people getting whiny and complainy about  
God’s seemingly not showing up,  
Malachi and John the Baptist say in effect,  
God’s on the way, but be aware.

God, when God comes,  
has some work to do in you.  
To make God a new priority, you will inhabit this  
zone of creative discomfort.

The outcome, of course, will be worth the effort,  
the tears, the trying. It will.

So we keep at it.

One postscript on my brush project.

I ended up with mountains of branches and leaves  
to haul away, but those roots?

I could have gone through a couple of chain saw  
blades and still not  
sliced through their buried, tenacious hold.

But a yard guy, a gardener we hired to put in  
beautiful new plants,  
he had this tool I didn't.

This special little saw with just the right blade.  
He made quick of final work of it.

I did my part, but he came in to cut out the last of  
the roots. He finally smoothed that ground to  
make it ready for a little garden of rhododendrons.

Repentance has a place,  
adopting simple practices can help,  
but more than anything, make room for God.

Try to pray more during Advent.  
Make sure you really let the familiar stories about  
shepherds and angels and Mary,  
and yes, John the Baptist, sink in.

Those stories will shake you up a bit,  
unsettle you a bit, but they can make you realize  
just how much growth and change  
God is willing, if you let him, to produce in you.