The Pain of Getting Well

Malachi 3:1-4
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
By: Ryan Dueck
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A few weeks ago, Naomi and I were in Canmore for our anniversary. We were poking around in a cool little bookstore when I happened upon a little book called *What Comes from Spirit* by the late Ojibway author Richard Wagamese.

He's best known for books like *Indian Horse*, *Medicine Walk*, and *One Native Life.*

I had the opportunity to meet Richard in 2014 when I hosted an MCC event at a church in Calgary. I remember him as a very soft-spoken and gentle man. A great storyteller. I recommend his books enthusiastically.

This particular book is a very short little thing and it's comprised mainly of scraps and fragments that he wrote online on his social media accounts. I came across this quote at the beginning of the introduction:

> I've come to understand that the pain of a wound or a loss is over as soon as it happens. What follows is the pain of getting well.[1]

I read that quote—particularly the last line—and thought, well that's too good not to use in a sermon. Maybe even a sermon title!

I didn't think of this in time for the bulletin, but my sermon this morning is called, "The Pain of Getting Well."

Richard Wagamese knows more than a little about the pain of getting well.

As a three-year-old, he and his siblings were abandoned in the woods of Western Ontario by his parents who went on a binge-drinking trip in town.

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[1] Richard Wagamese, *What Comes from Spirit* (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & MacIntyre, 2021), vii.

The children found their way to a railroad depot where they were found by a police officer. This kicked into motion a series of events that led to Wagamese spending the next half decade bouncing around foster homes.

This was followed by his adoption into a quite severe Christian home that prohibited him to maintain any contact with his indigenous heritage and identity, and from whom he would run away at sixteen.

Wagamese would not have any contact with his family until he was twenty-three years old. Over time, he would come to forgive them for abandoning him, knowing that they, too, were trying to outrun painful stories of their own. He described it like this:

> Each of the adults [that abandoned us] suffered in an institution that tried to scrape the Indian out of their insides, and they came back to the bush raw, sore and aching.[2]

In his late teen and young adult years, Richard Wagamese wandered down all too familiar roads. From the time he was sixteen, he lived on the street, abusing drugs and alcohol, and was imprisoned several times.

He spent time as a tree planter, a ditch digger, sugar beet picker, farm hand, railroad crew labourer, dish washer, fish cleaner, marina helper and a big rig washer—whatever kept a roof over his head and food in his belly.

Wagamese struggled with addiction for a significant part of his life. He was married and divorced three times, and had two sons, one of whom was estranged.

Through it all, he would read and read and read. He spent countless hours in libraries in his youth, often simply because it was a place to stay warm!

He began to write. And he was good at it. Over time words became his life.

His writings would be a powerful window into his own experience and with indigenous experience more broadly. And he would become a source of hope and courage and strength to many people who saw their stories in his.

In the second half of his life, he seemed to settle into peace with himself, his family, his spiritual beliefs, his identity, his place in the world.

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[2] https://web.archive.org/web/20170328150122/http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/ojibway-author-richard-wagamese-found-salvation-in-stories/article34422836/

In March 2017, he died far too young, at age 61.

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I don't know how old Richard Wagamese was when he wrote the line about the "pain of getting well."

My guess is that it was in the last third of his life. It's not the kind of line you can write without going through some stuff.

Getting well isn't easy.

Some wounds cut deep. Some pain lasts a long time. It shows up in unexpected places, even when you thought you were done with it or had at least in some sense moved on.

Getting well sometimes requires unlearning lies that have been told about you, lies that you have internalized and are hard to dislodge.

Getting well sometimes requires hard journeys of forgiving people who have done wrong to you and hurt you in deep and defining ways.

Getting well very often requires taking a hard look in the mirror, seeing unflattering truths, embracing personal responsibility, and deciding to pursue different paths.

In chapter five of John's gospel, Jesus asked a man who had been ill for nearly forty years and was lying by the pool of Bethsaida, if he "wanted to be made well."

This probably strikes us on the surface as a kind of stupid, even insulting question. After four decades of suffering, who wouldn't want to be made well?

But Jesus knew—and knows—that getting well isn't always an easy process, and that human beings often choose not to get well because of the costs seem too high.

Jesus knew—and knows— that growing, maturing, flourishing, learning health and strength and resilience, becoming what we were created to be is rarely a painless process.

From a Christian perspective, getting well means encountering God. The truth of God. The mercy of God. The summons of God. The freedom and hope of God.

It means facing honestly who we are in the light of who God is.

Even those of us who have been spared stories as difficult as Richard Wagamese's would probably acknowledge this as we look back on our own stories.

This week, I got one of those form letters that clog up our inboxes each December. It's the end of the year, and everyone wants money! In this case, it was Regent College, where I attended graduate school from 2005-2008.

But alongside the familiar appeals for assistance, there was a devotional written by a certain Mark Glanville, professor of pastoral theology, jazz pianist, and proud Australian. The devotional reflected upon "living in the wilderness":

> In Exodus… we read how God taught the Israelites to trust him in the wilderness. Day by day, God provided manna and quail—enough, but not *more* than enough, to sustain them for twenty-four hours. Every day, Israel had to choose to trust.
>
> It's the same with God's people through the ages, isn't it? **When our life is cruising, we have little need to trust in the Lord. I've never heard anyone say, "the year I really grew to trust God—what an easy year!"** No, the Lord meets us in the wilderness…
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> Here in late 2021, it feels like we've all spent years in the wilderness. A global pandemic, political turmoil, social upheaval—and through it all, cries for justice that too often go unanswered.
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> **How is this wilderness experience forming us? Can we learn, even now, to be people of hope?**

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This is the question, isn't it? It's the question of the Christian life in general and it's a question that takes on unique contours and specificity during the Advent season.

Can we become people of hope? Can we entrust ourselves to the one who comes to make us well, even though there is pain along the way?

Our text this morning takes place in a place and among a people who needed to be made well and to become people of hope.

Malachi was a prophet who spoke to "disillusioned" people. Malachi spoke to the people of Israel around 450 years or so before the birth of Christ.

The people of Israel had been through a lot.

They had been conquered first by the Assyrians (8th C BC) and then Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians (587 BC) hauled them off into exile, far from Jerusalem. Their temple was destroyed; their city was in ruins.

Then the Persians defeated the Babylonians and Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple in 538 (the story is found in Nehemiah and Ezra).

Hopes were high. Their fortunes were being restored! The people of Israel would once again soar to the heights that they inhabited during the glorious days of David and Solomon!

Except that wasn't how it turned out.

The Persian king did allow the Jewish exiles to return to their city and rebuild their temple, but there was still very little doubt about who was in charge and who was not.

The Jews were still an occupied people. They were still a tiny minority in a vast empire that cared very little about them or their God.

Time wore on as time does, and gradually relieved them of their illusions about any return to their former glory.

About one hundred years after the Jews returned to Jerusalem, Malachi arrives on the scene.

Disillusionment has brought with it disobedience.

The priests are corrupt, injustice and deceit are common. If we read on in Malachi 3, we encounter sorcery and adultery, false witness, the oppression of workers, the mistreatment of the widow, the orphan, the alien.

People no longer believe that God is on their side or even cares about them. The floods of mercy that people had once experienced from God seemed to have reduced to barely a trickle.

Into this context of disillusionment and disobedience, Malachi speaks a stern reminder… and a promise of hope.

A messenger is coming… A messenger to prepare the way of the Lord (3:1).

But the messenger does not simply come to comfort and reassure. He comes to purify. We have images of a refiner's fire and of fullers' soap.

The two images remind us that getting well is not a painless process.

The refiner's fire is likely a familiar metaphor. It comes from the process of purifying metal. A refiner uses a fire to heat metal to a molten state; then he skims off the dross that floats to the top. Impurities are quite literally burned off the metal.

The fullers' soap is perhaps less well known. A "fuller's" job was to cleanse and whiten cloth. In Jerusalem, the cleansing process took place in a fullers' field outside the city because of the smell. Dirt and oils were removed from the wool so that it would be pure white and ready to be dyed.

The type of soap used for this process was caustic and rough. It sadly calls to mind the "scraping" that Richard Wagamese refers to in reference to what the residential schools tried to do with his parents' identity.

In this case, though, it is not an ethnicity that is being scraped away, but those parts of each one of us that resist the love and holiness that we were created for.

Both images from Malachi come with some discomfort attached to them. There are things about God's people that need to change.

There will be some pain on the road to wellness.

But again, to return to the words of Mark Glanville, "I've never heard anyone say, 'the year I really grew to trust God—what an easy year!'"

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This year's Advent theme is "Dare to Imagine." Today, we are invited to "dare to imagine God's embrace."

The embrace of God always contains these two themes.

1. A promise: You are not abandoned. There is hope and light and love even in your darkest hour. God comes to his people.

2. A question (and a quite bracing one): Do you want to be made well? Do you want to face up to the truth of who you are? Will you be refined, purified, and cleansed? Do you want your life to align with God's creational intent and God's purposes for the world?

This is the embrace that pulls us along this Advent season (and throughout the year). And those who have been through this refining process often speak of uniquely experiencing the presence of God in the process.

There is a scene in Kate Bowler's recent book *No Cure for Being Human*" where she's talking with a therapist friend about how she strangely felt God's presence most acutely when she was in the grip of a cancer that she thought would kill her.

Her friend responded,

> You have felt the mighty and indescribable love of God. It is wholeness and beauty and holiness… but it is not Disney World.[3]

How very true. Sometimes it is in our hardest moments when we most deeply experience the presence and comfort of God. But it's not Disney World.

"Disney World" is fun, perhaps, but it's not much good at producing character, deepening love, solidifying trust, or strengthening faith.

Wherever we find ourselves, the call to us this Advent season is the same as it was to the people of Israel that Malachi spoke to, those languishing under Persian rule four hundred years before Christ.

Repent. Believe. Hope. Seek purity and uprightness, even when the light isn't obvious and when disillusionment creeps in.

Prepare for the Lord who comes both as our comforter and as our judge who loves us too much to leave us as we are, in our sin and our confusion.

Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly.

Step boldly into the pain of getting well knowing that the One whose embrace we long for does not leave us and walks with us down every road.

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[3] Kate Bowler, *No Cure for Being Human (And Other Truths I Need to Hear)* (New York: Random House, 2021), 175.

Wait well, for your king has come and will come again.

This is truly good news, full of hope.

Earlier, I referenced a devotional about the wilderness by Regent professor Mark Glanville. He ends, appropriately, with this hope. I will give him the last word this morning:

> The Christian concept of hope is… more than a wish—it's *trust*. Just as the Israelites trusted God to provide food each day in the desert, we are called to trust that God will recover the divine purposes for creation. **Trust that God will mend this good world at the renewal of all things. Trust that God won't give up on what God has made**…
>
> The final prayer in the Bible is a cry of hope: "*Maranatha*; come, Lord Jesus." As we remember Christ's first coming, can we cultivate hope for his return? Can we make this our prayer, our ache, our longing? May the Spirit of Christ help us live into the hope we have in him.

Amen.