

**“God in the Door”**  
**Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6**  
**A Communion Meditation preached by Carla Pratt Keyes**  
**Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA**  
**December 6, 2009**

In the old book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard reflects on an experience from her childhood. I want to share her essay with you, called “God in the Door.” It was a cold Christmas Eve, Dillard says, and

I was up unnaturally late, because we had all gone out to dinner – my parents, my baby sister and I. We had come home to a warm living room, and Christmas Eve. Our stockings drooped from the mantel; beside them, a special table bore a bottle of ginger ale and a plate of cookies.

I had taken off my fancy winter coat and was standing on the heat register to bake my shoe soles and warm my bare legs. There was a commotion at the front door; it opened, and a cold wind blew around my dress.

Everyone was calling me. “Look who’s here! Look who’s here!” I looked. It was Santa Claus. Whom I never – ever – wanted to meet. Santa Claus was looming in the doorway and looking around for me . . . . I ran upstairs.

Like everyone in his right mind, I feared Santa Claus, thinking he was God. I was still thoughtless and brute, reactive. I knew right from wrong, but had barely tested the possibility of shaping my own behavior, and then only from fear, and not yet from love. Santa Claus was an old man whom you never saw, but who nevertheless saw you; he knew when you’d been bad or good. He knew when you’d been bad or good! And I had been bad.

My mother called and called, enthusiastic, pleading. My father encouraged me; my sister howled. I wouldn’t come down, but I could bend over the stairwell and see: Santa Claus stood in the doorway with the night over his shoulder, letting in all the cold air of the sky, Santa Claus stood in the doorway monstrous and bright, powerless, ringing a loud bell and repeating, Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas. I never came down. I don’t know who ate the cookies.

For so many years now I have known that this Santa Claus was actually a rigged-up Miss White, who lived across the street. [Even today I confuse the characters of this nighttime drama in my mind,] making of Santa Claus, God and Miss White an awesome, vulnerable trinity. This is really a story about Miss White.

Miss White was old; she lived alone in a big house across the street. She liked having me around; she plied me with cookies, taught me things about the world, and tried to interest me in finger painting, in which she herself took great

pleasure . . . I liked her. She meant no harm on earth, and yet half a year after her failed visit as Santa Claus, I ran from her again.

That day, a day of the following summer, Miss White and I knelt in her yard while she showed me a magnifying glass. It was a large, strong hand lens. She lifted my hand and, holding it very still, focused a dab of sunshine on my palm. The glowing crescent wobbled, spread, and finally contracted to a point. It burned; I was burned. I ripped my hand away and ran home crying. Miss White called after me, sorry, explaining, but I didn't look back.

Even now I wonder: if I meet God, will he take and hold my bare hand in his, and focus his eye on my palm, and kindle that spot and let me burn?

But no. It is I who misunderstood everything and let everybody down. Miss White, God, I am sorry I ran from you. I am still running, running from the knowledge, that eye, that love from which there is no refuge. For you meant only love, and love, and I felt only fear, and pain. So once in Israel love came to us incarnate, stood in the doorway between two worlds, and we were all afraid.<sup>1</sup>

There is no denying that the scripture texts for today are somewhat frightening. In a way, they put us all beneath a large, strong magnifying glass for a painful kind of examination. Between John crying out for repentance, and Malachi wondering who will be able to stand when God appears, it seems there is reason to fear how God will judge us when God comes. The consensus appears to be that we do not stand up to scrutiny.

Now, on the one hand, I think too many of us feel that way already. We do not need somebody telling us – least of all the prophets – that we have been bad. We're pretty good at feeling bad. (Oxymoronic though that is.) On the other hand, this is part of our waiting. It is part of our Advent preparation to look carefully at the ways we behave, the things we value, the directions we are going – and when we do, we often find that we have reason to repent.

Last year in a lecture at the University of Richmond, someone asked Anne Lamott about repentance. Anne is one of those who has a hard time loving herself, but *wants* to. "Repentance" (as it's classically understood) does not feature much in her writing. In answer to the question, Anne basically said that to her, repentance is the change we make when we experience enough pain. "It has to get really bad for me," she said, "before I pick up the phone to call somebody to get help – help to get a better perspective on what's going on in my life." So, maybe you're lost in a sea of depression, and you repent by calling a doctor. Maybe you're maxing out your credit cards, and you repent by cutting them up. Maybe you're feeling lonely – terribly lonely – and you finally tell somebody that; you repent by reaching out to a friend. In such times, it can feel like an act of desperation to repent. Then – a release, almost.

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Harper & Row Publishers, NY, 1982, 139-140.

But other times it is hard work – the choice to behave differently. For Christians, it’s a decision to meet Christ in the doorway and follow where he leads, by living in ways God might like . . . instead of ways that leave us feeling ashamed in God’s presence. Since Advent is a time of preparing for Christ, it is a good time for this work . . . a time to ask ourselves – what *bad behavior* might we leave behind? Where has selfishness taken us over, so we indulge ourselves at the expense of others? How has pride warped our thinking, so we do not listen adequately to others? Where might we be more generous, more patient, more truthful, more kind to the people around us? How might we order our priorities better, so we spend more energy on things that matter? How have we forgotten God – failing to thank and obey our Creator, our Redeemer? To ask ourselves such questions – confessing what is wrong in our lives and choosing to act in ways that are good – it’s a way to step out of the places we’ve hidden and descend the stairs, toward God in the doorway, looking for us.

In another decades-old book, Frederick Buechner defines repentance as a kind of coming to your senses. It is not, he says, so much something you *do* as something *that happens*. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, “I’m sorry,” than to the future and saying “Wow!”<sup>2</sup> I would modify that definition, I think, to say that repentance is not so much something we do, as something God makes possible for us. It is the healing work of God’s spirit within us – to help us determine what is best and come confidently into the presence of Christ. And the “Wow!” will spring more easily to our lips if we focus on the one who stands in the door, bringing love, only love – not to hurt us, but in the hope that we will return it.

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<sup>2</sup> *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC.*