Malachi 3:1-4, John 1:6-13

“Don’t shoot the messenger”

 Our task today takes us to the Gospel of John with the verses: “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.” Just from these words alone we can infer that this John is a messenger. I’ve had a hard time this week focusing on this Scripture apart from the reality of what is happening in the world, and specifically what is happening in China with Chen Guanchen. You may not know that name, but if I were to say have you heard about the blind Chinese dissident that escaped 24 hour surveillance and was able to stumble his way to the US Embassy and seek refuge there for a number of days you would probably know exactly what I’m talking about.

 China was furious because Chen had a message that he had been broadcasting for years that was considered dangerous to the government. It had already landed him in jail and he is basically an all around embarrassment to the government. I can understand the feeling of the US diplomats having worked with some of them that are there now in Moscow. They are under incredibly intense pressure. But the message that Chen had was powerful enough to mobilize the two most powerful nations on the face of the earth. Now, that is a powerful voice, that has to be a powerful message. But it was also a powerful enough message to put him and his family in physical danger.

 There really is nothing like the truth that strikes a chord and motivates people. Today in our Scripture we see someone who had a message and as the messenger ultimately it does cost his life. John the Baptist wasn’t shot, but he was beheaded. My prayer for us today is that we recognize that the message that we carry, and the message that we proclaim, is even more powerful than the message of Chen Guanchen. Over history this message has been able to topple governments, to bring down kingdoms and thrones, but even more importantly it is powerful enough to bring salvation to those who would hear it.

 I hope that today we would see the importance of our role as messengers and how exactly are we called to live that out.

**READ**

Our reading in Malachi takes us directly to the fact that God has sent his messenger to prepare the way of the Lord. The responsibility of that messenger is to bring the good news of the Gospel. But, no sooner does he say that then we hear his words in verse 2 but who can endure the day of his coming? The message proclaimed by the messenger is powerful enough to purify us and cleanse us and we see that this is what God yearns for us in vs. 2 and 3 that he will refine us. But, that message isn’t always comforting.

 One of my favorite scenes in Narnia in the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe is when Lucy is speaking with Mr. Beaver and he is explaining who Aslan is. Aslan is the lion who represents Jesus in all of the C.S. Lewis books. Lucy asks Mr. Beaver: but is he safe? And the response is Safe? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn’t safe, but he is good.

 When John the Baptist come in John 1 bringing the message of God’s goodness, and mercy, and salvation through Jesus Christ who is this light of the world that is described and that we’ve been talking about for a couple of weeks now, he comes as a messenger that was sent. There was a man sent from God. God in Malachi sends his messenger. It is almost as if he didn’t have a choice. As Christians do we have a choice but to spread the Gospel?

 Stacy and I have been so blessed to be able to do this work all over the world. As 24 year olds we were pastors in the oldest reformed body in the world. The Waldensian Church of Italy was around 300 years before the reformation and after seminary we went to serve an orphanage and 4 churches. As pastors in the Waldensian church we automatically had voice in their General Assembly which met up in the Alps in Turin where they had settled to escape from persecution in the 16th century.

 There we were 2 of 120 pastors and there was an examination that was taking place on the floor of a candidate who wanted to become a pastor and the question was posed to him: Why do you want to be a preacher? He answered with Paul’s words in I Corinthians 9:16 – woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel. I can’t imagine doing anything else. And boy did this resonate in a hall that had been built upon the backs of their ancestors who had been killed for preaching that very same message. And they preached it not for their benefit, not as a career, not because Protestant preachers had favored status in Italy, but because they were sent, they were called to preach. They couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

 In our John Scripture vs. 7 states that he came as a witness to the light. In the Greek the term witness is marturion. What does that sound like? Marture: He came knowing that his life might be demanded of him for the message that he was bringing. His entire purpose of being a messenger, John tells us in verse 7, is that all would believe. He may have to pay a price for people to find faith, but he was ready. His whole purpose was wrapped up in bringing people to faith.

 My grandfather, whom I never met because he died before I was born, was a missionary in the Congo in the 30s and 40s. My mom grew up as a missionary kid in the Congo. But my grandmother lived to be 90 something and we all remember her. She told me a story about him that I’ll never forget. He was one of the leaders for that mission that was sent out by the Disciples of Christ and so he would be the one to go way out in the least populated and remote areas. He would meet people that had never heard of Jesus before, entire villages and groups of people.

 He once came upon a very large village. They had never seen a white man before, and had never heard of Jesus either. He befriended the chief who spoke a tribal language that he understood and through that relationship he came to know Christ. Over his stay there the entire village came to know Christ. But before he left the village the chief said: next time you come back bring a teacher like you to stay with us and we will reach out to other villages.

 Well, a year passed and the mission board was not able to afford another pastor so my grandfather went out again by himself. The chief met him, but he was obviously disappointed because he was by himself. He stayed and taught and the more and more people came to know Christ and they even began going to other villages with the message. My grandfather went to leave again the chief said, please, next time, bring a teacher. My grandfather hoping to buy some time said, but if I bring a teacher where will he stay and where will he teach? The chief looked disgruntled and walked away.

 Another year passed, my grandfather came back and the chief again was unhappy, but then cheered up and said come see, look what we did. He showed him a house and a meeting room that the village had made just waiting for the teacher when he would come. He stayed and more and more people came to know Christ. That changed it for my grandfather. He was determined to take a teacher with him next time he went.

 During that next year WWII overtook the country and so my mom and her family had to leave the Congo. 4 years passed and they were finally able to go back to the Congo. My grandfather immediately went back and he was able to come back with a young pastor who was excited to be involved in ministry. As they were going on their way they saw on the path someone from the village a fair amount away from the village. They greeted him and he told my grandfather that someone from within the village had killed the chief and taken them back to idol worship and away from the God of the white man. That missed opportunity to preach the Gospel haunted my grandfather for the rest of his life.

 We have a certain responsibility with this message entrusted to us that we often forget. In our John Scripture we read about this responsibility. As missionaries in a foreign land it is always exciting to bring the power of the Gospel to those who have never heard it. Well, that is probably much easier than what we find John and even Jesus having to do.

 Look at vs. 11 and we read “he came unto his own.” Some versions read and he came to his home. Where was Jesus’ home? That’s an easy one because we hear in Luke 4:16 “When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up.” Nazareth was his home and when he preached there they drove him out of the synagogue and tried to kill him. Don’t shoot, or behead, or crucify the messenger.

 You know if you ask a missionary or a military kid where are you from, get read y for a long answer. I think of Rachel: you mean where I was born, oh that’s Italy. You mean where I lived the longest? Oh, that’s Florida. You mean where I grew up? That would be Moscow. No, you mean my real home? Well, that’s Strasburg, that’s where I’m from, that’s my real home. If your parents served in the military you know what I’m talking about. But Jesus’ home was Nazareth and he was not well received there.

 They say familiarity breeds contempt. I think Jim Powl had an antidote for that. In his case, familiarity bred respect. But when the Gospel is preached in a setting where the messenger is known, well, that can be trouble, but it doesn’t diminish the power of the message.

 I believe the United States is a type of Nazareth to the Gospel message. It is the most Christian nation in the world on paper. The message of the Gospel is no longer new. How do we make the message new without getting shot or ridiculed? In his last verses here John tells us that the power of the Gospel is that it creates children of God. Children not born out of familiarity, not born of flesh and blood, not born out of passion, but by the will of God.

 Today at communion you will hear again that you are children of God. As children, you become messengers. The message which you carry has been powerful enough over history to change governments and to change lives. Don’t allow the familiarity of your Christianity dampen the power of the message. Amen.