

## Preparing the Way Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 1: 68-79; Luke 3: 2-6

The theme of this day is obvious both in the time of the Prophet Malachi, Gospel writer Luke and for us: Preparation! At this time of the year, most people are busy preparing for Christmas or at least the New Year of 2022 which will follow soon after. Many tasks need to be accomplished, gifts to prepare, goodies to bake, cards to send and maybe even a tree to decorate. At our house, there is a long list of cleaning and planning to be done since our children and grandchildren will be home for several days after Christmas. While there is a wonderful joy being together with them again after almost two years of all being apart, there is also the human question- will we be prepared?

In the church, we ask a similar, and much more critical and necessary question- will we focus on being prepared for CHRIST or will our primary emphasis be on fulfilling all the tasks on our lists for the Christmas holidays? The lessons from Malachi and Luke this morning focus on the work of preparation that God does. God IS at work in us, preparing us and the world for something magnificent- if only we have eyes to see it and hearts to welcome it.

The unknown author of the book of Malachi is considered to be a prophet of the early fifth century, someone who was especially devoted to the Temple and its priesthood. The title of the book comes from the first verse in today's lesson. In Hebrew, the word Malachi means "my messenger." Verse 1 of Chapter three begins, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me." Since the book is anonymous, it is referred to by topic- "my messenger"- rather than by author.

One more thought, Malachi, considered as one of the Minor Prophets, is the final book in the Old Testament. Chapter 4, the final chapter, lifts up the coming of the "Great Day of the Lord" with the promise that there is hope- the land will not be struck with a curse. Checking several interpretations of Malachi, the very last word in the majority of them is "curse." That seems significant in light of the next book in the Bible being the New Testament book of Matthew which begins with the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah. The sense that the history found in the Old Testament- the urgency of turning from evil ways and the yearning for someone to save them - is clearly fulfilled in the New Testament with the ministry of Jesus and the sharing of the good news to the world of that day and beyond, even until today.

A Day of the Lord is coming, the Prophet Malachi insists, and it will be a day of judgment. But- and this is the primary theological statement- God will first send a messenger to prepare the way! It was customary in the ancient world for monarchs to send messengers ahead of themselves, announcing their arrival. That way people have a chance to be ready to greet their ruler in an appropriate manner- in a way similar to the news media announcing President Biden's visit to Minnesota this past week. The identity and nature of this messenger is

mysterious. An interesting point here is that God's messenger does not just announce the coming of the Lord but actually prepares the way themselves. Malachi- this messenger- does not just tell people to get everything in order; Malachi takes responsibility for getting things in order.

The role of the messenger here is described as that of a refiner. The assumption, then, is that there is something worth saving, something essentially good in God's people. This is consistent with the theological understanding of people being created in the image of God but defiled by sin. Whatever the extent of that corruption, God still sees something precious that can be recovered in humanity: gold, silver. However, in our heart of hearts, we know that none of us can stand with confidence before God. Because we cannot get our entire act together on our own, we need God in Christ to purify us.

One of Malachi's principal goals is to motivate the people to present the right offerings to the Lord, pure offerings, not blemished. In Chapter 1 of Malachi, verses 13-14, we find the people were bringing animals for sacrifices that were the leftovers- not pure and unblemished as was required by law. Malachi states, "You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick and this you bring as your offering!" One cannot help but be reminded of what offerings we bring to God- the leftovers, or the very best as God expects!

In these days our worship services are focused on the coming of Christ- both at Christmas and for eternity. The best way to be ready for Christmas, the New Year and life is to get out of the way, to put our vanity and arrogance aside, and be drawn closer to God, putting the focus on the CHRIST in this season and for all seasons. There is wonderful advice in a Christmas song, "What shall I give him poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. What shall I give him? Give him my heart!"

Turning to Luke- the lectionary actually divides Luke's account of the ministry of John the Baptist into two readings- for this week, this Second Sunday of Advent and for next week- the third Sunday of Advent. The reading for this week provides us with Luke's attempt to set the background and context for John's ministry. The first verse of Chapter 3 gives the names of the Emperor, governors, and rulers at the time, thus Luke places the time of his writing in the context of history. A bit more context- both John's mother and father were descendants of Aaron- the priestly line. We remember the account of John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, both older, had no children. An angel comes to Zechariah as he is going about his priestly duties in the temple and tells him they will have a son. Zechariah argues a bit and questions how he will know this is true. The angel tells him he will be mute- he will not be able to speak until the promised child is born. The Angel says the child is to be named John and "he will be great in the sight of the Lord- even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit." As

the angel said, Zechariah went from the temple and could not speak from the time of that encounter. Once the child was born, and was circumcised, folks wanted to name him Zechariah after his father, which was the typical custom. Elizabeth objected and said, "he is to be named John." Zechariah was questioned about the name, and writing on a tablet, he agreed the name was to be John. It was at that time, his speech returned and we find the words of prophecy he spoke found in Luke 1: 68-79. As John grew he lived in the wilderness, dressed roughly and living off the land. We read little of John until Jesus came to him to be baptized.

Because of the heritage of John's parents, his destiny was more likely as a priest- his being of the priestly line of Aaron. But God destined him to be a prophet. God was preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah in such new and subtle ways as: 1) choosing an unborn son, not the father of the priestly line for the important announcing task; 2) appointing the son as a prophet, rather than a priest, as to his office of service in the kingdom; and 3) giving him a name that was different from his father's, all signs a new day was dawning. The quotation from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 40:4) is used by Luke in Chapter 3 to describe the anticipated transformation of this new day- "valleys will be filled, mountains leveled, crooked paths straightened and rough roads smoothed." The radical changes on the landscape are so, not necessarily because they are new, in the sense of original creation, but because they take what IS and bring about the opposite. Just as a valley may be filled or a mountain leveled, God takes the reality of sin and transforms it into the opportunity for forgiveness. God takes the reality of death and calls forth life. God takes the reality of despair and re-shapes hope in the human heart.

Through the words of Isaiah as recorded in Luke 3, we find a message of a call to hope. The people might be in the valley and their Babylonian captors on the mountain. But the mountains were going to be cut down and the valleys were going to be lifted up. In other words, God was going to act for the forgotten, the downtrodden, the poor, the prisoners, the desperate. That's good news if you are a valley, but bad news if you are a mountain. Can't help but reflect on the economic atmosphere in our country today when about 1% can consider themselves to be on that mountain top. Take a good look at today's world. There is not much question that most of humanity suffers in the valley while a small percentage sits on the mountain. Much of our current news is focused on just that. We may not want to hear John the Baptist, dress and live like him, but what if leveling the mountains and filling the valleys is the only way to get to Bethlehem.

One of the hardest tasks for the church this time of year is to cut through the layers of commercialism, consumerism, and sentimentality. There are so many activities vying for our time and energies. There are so many people for whom we feel we need to buy presents.

There are so many emotions from the past and the present that flood our hearts, often times creating conflicting feelings within us about the season. How will CHRIST be heard in the midst of all this? Will we be able to share the message of truth in such a way that it will cut through the layers that bury us under over-crowded calendars, and entertaining alternatives to “the true meaning of Christmas.” For if we cannot remain centered on Christ now, what will become of our Christmas season, Will there simply be a relief that all the commotion is over and we can relax? The words of Malachi call us today to present the pure offering of our hearts, dedicated solely to the Lord, unblemished- in other words, distracted and tired out-with worldly care and use.

Preparation through our worship life is certainly an aspect of the Advent season. But, there is also a preparation that takes place through our fellowship and service together as Christians year around. This means we are part of one another (each and every member). We pray for one another; we thank God for one another; we are bound to one another. Living the fruits of righteousness so that others are blessed by them through you is perhaps the best gift you can give to the ONE who is coming to give of himself for you. The growth of churches through small group ministry indicates how people are searching for community, fellowship connectedness and partnership in life. This search was clearly evident in this past year when we were forced to worship on line....there was a definite joy, even relief when we dared to meet- even carefully- within the sanctuary once again. For while we prepare for the celebration of the first coming of Jesus, we must also be anticipating his second coming, when he will bring to completion all the good that has been begun in his name and for his glory.

Until that time, the way of repentance marks the character of the Christian life. The visual images in Luke 3: 5 reflect the changes that the coming Messiah calls forth in us. We really never get it quite right when it comes to our relationship with God. We are in constant need of being called back to God. Worship and Advent messages can change the terrain of one’s soul, so that when Jesus comes (in the manger of his birth and the preaching of his word), he will have a place to rest and give rest to all others who are eager to see and experience the salvation of God.

From Luke 3: 4b-6- “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 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 flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

As we learn to say these words with John the Baptist, we also join him in his work of preparing the world to receive its king. As we prepare to receive CHRIST into our own lives, we may find that we are helping others benefit from our efforts to put Jesus first in the season. Amen