

“Prepare the Way”

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Malachi 3:1-4 (NRSV)

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ²But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; ³he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:1-6 (NRSV)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵Every 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;⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Advent falls later in the calendar this year than is usually the case, at least in relation to Thanksgiving Day. Most years, the first Sunday of Advent falls right after Thanksgiving, but not this year. That is because November had five Thursdays this year, and Thanksgiving Day is on the *fourth* Thursday – not necessarily the *last* Thursday. Because of that, we had Thanksgiving, and then another Sunday before last week's *First Sunday of Advent*. With this calendar, it feels like we've been in the Christmas season for quite some time now. The jolly guy in the red suit rode in the Macy's parade seventeen days ago. As soon as Thanksgiving ends, it's Christmas time, right? Or, really, long before. A few years ago, I went into Lowe's on the evening of October 29th, and was surprised to find that they had removed all of their Halloween decorations already. Two days before Halloween, and it was *all* gone. You might think that they had replaced the Halloween decorations with Thanksgiving decorations, but I looked and couldn't find a single Thanksgiving decoration. Instead, Christmas was everywhere. With Halloween and Thanksgiving having not even arrived yet, Lowe's was ready for Christmas – with pre-lit artificial trees, wreaths, lights galore, small and large figurines, and inflatable lawn ornaments. It was all there, ready for Christmas in October.

We push Christmas earlier and earlier each year. And why not? "It's the most wonderful time of the year," as the song reminds us. Why not jump over everything else and get straight to the joy of the holiday? Why not? Because, as John the Baptist reminds us in our Gospel lesson for today, there's some preparing to do. It's not quite Christmas time yet.

And that's a challenge because we have lost the ability to wait. The culture in which we live is a non-stop flow of activity. We have fast-food, instant news on 24 hour cable channels, instant information on computers and phones, near-instant food in our microwaves, same day delivery. Everything comes fast, with no waiting necessary. We don't remember how to wait, or

even why we might *want* to do so. Yet, we are in the season of Advent and it *is* a season, not just a moment. The word “advent” means “a *coming* into place, view or being.” It is a process. It is not instantaneous. It is unlike the 24 hour news. Advent takes time. It takes time to prepare.

My friend and mentor Rev. William Warren puts this well. He says, Advent says to us “before we start singing ‘Joy to the world the Lord is come,’ maybe we need to consider what is so joyful to us about the coming of this Lord. What is the sadness and the dreariness and the discouragement within us that is answered by the coming of Jesus into the world? Before we start lighting candles and singing ‘Silent Night’, maybe we need to come to grips with the darkness in us that cries out for the light of Jesus’ presence.”

We need this time of preparation. We need to not jump ahead to the Joy of Christmas morning without examining the world and ourselves first. We live in a place of plenty, where, for most of us, our needs are almost always met, where we all too often believe that we are self-made people, doing it all on our own. *What need do we have of a savior?* Have we filled the emptiness in our hearts with possessions? Have we stuffed ourselves so full that we don’t even know that there *is* an emptiness within us? These are some of the questions that Advent invites us to consider as we prepare. We should not just go through the motions one more year. We must consider the great Joy that is ours through the birth of our Savior. Even before that, we must realize our absolute need *for* a Savior! We must set aside the *things* we have attempted to satisfy ourselves with, so that we can be ready for our coming Lord.

Advent is a time to heed the words of John the Baptist. All four Gospels start out the story of the ministry of Jesus with the story of John the Baptist. The Gospels of Mark and John do not even narrate the story of the *birth* of Jesus, but all four gospel authors make sure to include the story of John, the forerunner of the Messiah. *Prepare. Make straight the way of the Lord.* His

words are jarring, especially in this time when we want to skip ahead to the joy of Christmas morning, but they are words we need to hear, and to heed. He is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

We don't have people over to our house very often. When we do, though, we spend a great deal of time preparing the house for our guests to arrive. We take care of the general debris of the busy lives of a family of five, particularly since ours is a homeschooling family using our living space every day for learning, as well. However, for guests, we take it a step further – a deeper cleaning of the house, getting out the good dishes and utensils. We look at the house through the eyes of guests, and the house suddenly looks different.

How much more should we examine our *lives* through the eyes of our Savior? How much more should we prepare our hearts to welcome the coming king?

The Message paraphrase has this passage we read from Luke as “Thunder in the desert: Prepare God's arrival! Make the road smooth and straight!” “Thunder in the desert” – here we are, getting ready for Christmas, buying presents, planning family visits, going to Christmas parties, stringing lights – when John comes at us like “thunder in the desert.”

One pastor tells of trying to bring John the Baptist into the Christmas pageant. The John character came into the sanctuary yelling “Repent, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” His was an awkward contrast to the peace of the rest of the nativity scene – Mary with her newborn babe, Joseph proudly standing by, shepherds in bathrobes, and regal wise men carrying their gifts. The pastor says that this didn't really go over well, so they toned down the role, at first. Eventually, though, they dropped John from the cast.

We don't really want John showing up at our party, do we? He's here straight from the wilderness. He's smelly and he's messy – other gospels tell us he's wearing "clothing of camel's hair" and he's eating "locusts and wild honey." And he's loud. He says hold on, there. Take a look at what you are doing! "Prepare God's arrival! Make the road smooth and straight!" All of our activities of this season keep us busy, but is our focus on what it should be? Is the road smooth and straight for Christ's arrival? John calls us, as the prophet Isaiah did long before him, to push aside all those things that get in the way of the coming of our Lord. Showing our love for others through gifts is good, but if the focus is on the *gifts*, then they can get in between us and Christ. Spending time with our families is good, but if the focus is not on the love of Christ we see in each other, we have not made the way straight for the Lord.

John calls us, in this season of waiting and preparation, to repentance. That's one of those "church words" that we don't really like to think about. We often think that we've got that covered by simply praying our prayer of confession and hearing the words of assurance of pardon. But repentance is so much more than confession. *Metanoia*, the Greek word translated as repentance, is actually a common word in Greek. It's not really a religious word. It means something pretty close to "*about face*." Repentance isn't just confessing our sins. It isn't just receiving forgiveness. It is turning around. It is doing a 180. It is changing direction, turning our backs on the sins of the past, and turning our faces to our God. It is not just *listing* our sins; it is turning around and charting a new course in life. When we repent, we turn away from the old life that we were leading, and turn toward Jesus and the new life that we can instead live, through God's grace. Repentance is a big part of this time of waiting, of preparing. This is a time to examine our lives, to see what we need to turn away from. We look at our lives through the eyes of our Redeemer. It is a time of reflection on the *darkness* that exists in our lives, so that we will be ready for the *light* of

Christ. It is a time of examining the empty places in ourselves, so that we will be ready for Christ to fill us up.

Advent is a forgotten time in our culture, but it doesn't have to be a forgotten time in our lives. It is an important time for us, and I hope that we will not rush past it in a hurry to get to Christmas morning, for the joy and light of Christmas morning will be ever brighter when we have spent time in waiting. Waiting is tough, I know. Patience is difficult. But the joy of Christmas morning is worth the wait, and Christmas will be even more meaningful after we turn away from the old lives we had been living, so that we may turn toward the wonderful light of Jesus Christ.

Amen