

## Prepare the Way Within

### **Malachi 3:1-4**

3 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. 2 But 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 washers’ soap; 3 he 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. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in former years.

We do not read often from the book of Malachi, but it is the book that concludes the section of the Hebrew Scriptures called “Prophets.” The name of this last prophet, Malachi means “my messenger.” He was a prophet of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, the temple that was rebuilt after the people returned from the exile in Babylon. He lamented religious corruption that had developed there, and through the divine speech, proclaimed the sudden arrival of God in the temple.

And who were the people Malachi was speaking to? They were the people living in Judea in the 5<sup>th</sup>. Century BCE, under the Persian Empire. What could they possibly have in common with us? Well, they were a mixture of peoples of diverse backgrounds; some had returned from the exile in Babylon, some had never left the land and “were always there,” and still others were more recent arrivals, who had moved there, stayed and intermarried.

There, they lived together uncomfortably with competing messages as to what faithful living meant to them now. Which leaders should they follow? Which direction should their nation go? They were an ancient people in a limited geographical area, and yet they are also, in a way, a microcosm of modern-day countries, like our own.

To them, Malachi says God arrives in the time of great discontent and disappointment; God comes to God’s people in the midst of their struggles for direction. Malachi doesn’t side with any of the groups, but says to them all, prepare the way within you for God’s arrival, let yourselves be changed by the refiner’s fire and the soap of the washer; be refined and purified like pure gold and silver. Then, you will know the right living before God again.

Malachi is the last book in the Hebrew Scripture that Christians have called the Old Testament, and we hear from the prophets no more... for 450 years.... Until.... Now, hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to

### **Luke 3:1-6**

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, 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, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as 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 5 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, 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

In those days, events were dated in relation to the rulers of the period, or the number of years since the founding of Rome. The gospel writer Luke followed the former method. People must have had a different sense of where they were in the history and what was happening around them. What time is it? Well, it depended on who was ruling over you. It changed as the power in the world shifted.

In this fluidity of human time we call “Chronos time” God acted definitively in God’s fullness of time, “Kairos time,” the time God acts. Kairos time runs deep: 1000 years are like a day. In Kairos time, we celebrate the baby Jesus’ birth that has taken place AND expectantly await the coming of our Prince of Peace all at once. That’s how the time flows during Advent. We are reminded God’s time breaks into our human time, in the fullness of time.

It had been 450 years since the last prophet Malachi spoke when John the Baptist appeared. He brings forth the call of Malachi and Isaiah, the prophets of old, to prepare the way of the Lord, to the people who now live in another time.

The political rulers Luke names here were the power-that-be that dominated the world into which Jesus was born, Caesar at the top, then the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate, and then the puppet king for Rome, Herod, was the ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene; these were regions into which the Kingdom of Herod the Great were divided after his death.

But it’s not only the political leaders Luke names here. The high priests Annas and Caiaphas represent the religious authorities of the time. Luke wasn’t naming names just to mark the time; he was telling us something about the world, real world, Jesus was born into. These power players in politics and in religion, they would all work against Jesus in the days that followed. Herod imprisoned John and sought to kill Jesus. Jesus was brought before the high priests, only to be handed over to Pontius Pilate for trial. You think our government is clunky;

Jesus had pretty thick layers of a social system that did not operate by the values and principles to which he was committed, the rule of the Divine Love.

You can't tell Jesus not to get political or religious, because he didn't have choice, he was born into a real world, just like ours, and to proclaim the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God where God's Love was the justice that brought peace, was to come in direct conflict with the power-that-be of the world, and he took God's side, every time.

Prophet Isaiah called "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined." The writer of John's Gospel wrote "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it," and Luke here is *showing us* what this darkness looked like in Jesus' time, putting faces to it; so, perhaps, we can recognize the darkness in our time when we see it. And we are to take God's side, every time.

But after Luke set John in this political setting, Luke doesn't get into John's political interactions; rather, he shifts the focus to John's "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Luke wants us to see that, yes, what's happening in the political and religious spheres in our world matters, but before engaging with those challenges, we are directed to focus first on our own repentance and re-orient ourselves toward God.

If we are re-oriented to God, if we are preparing the way within that lead to God, then how we engage with the political and religious powers of our time will follow. To do that, we must first prepare the Way Within, through repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The Greek word translated here as to "repent" is *metanoia*, and it has nothing to do with "feeling sorry or ashamed of what you have done." According to the Greek Orthodox Church, *metanoia* means to change one's mind; to expand your mind in such a way as to have a new perspective on the world or one's self. It is not simply the regret and remorse for the past wrong that make us look backward, but an expansive transformation of our heart to God's new vision that looks forwards. It's an invitation to join in the new thing God is doing.

And the phrase here is "repentance FOR or INTO forgiveness of sins." The word translated here as forgiveness comes from a Greek word meaning "to let go, to release, to deliver from." It's the same word that translated Jesus' words quoting Isaiah, when he said God has sent him to proclaim the release to the captives. Forgiveness is God's doing; it is the gift of God that releases us from the grip of our mistakes, the wrongs we've done, making our "crooked ways" "straight," so our path, our journey through the wilderness of our lives, we can see the salvation

of God, the peace of God. And this gift is to All peoples, not only for a select few. All will see the salvation of God.

Our world has its own Herod and Pilate, high priests and others. As Jesus lived among them proclaiming the good news, so also, we are called to engage with the world as it is, proclaiming the good news. So, the call to prepare the way of the Lord is a personal one but it also sends us out into the world to prepare the way of the Lord in the world. In both cases, to prepare the way of the Lord requires us to be mindful, to be discerning of the voice of the Spirit.

In Advent, we are called to prepare the way of the Lord within while we look forward, through repentance that is the expanding of our minds to new way of thinking and being and doing, even in the midst of political and spiritual confusion in our world. We're forgiven people, we are people made free and empowered to join God's desire for creation, of straightened paths, valleys and mountains made into plains and rough ways made smooth.

What do these images spell? In Japanese, the word Peace begins with a character for "flatness" or "smoothness and evenness." God's desire for us is peace, and we are to prepare our hearts to receive the prince of peace and the reign of God's peace to come.

Before we can bask in Christmas joy and the birth of a special baby, John forces us to examine ourselves and our world. Notice the valleys to be filled, mountains and hills to be made low, so a straight path can stretch before all of us to see the salvation of God.

If this images of flattening mountains and leveling up of the valleys don't translate well into your dailiness of life, the pastor of a Presbyterian Church in NC, Kathy Beach, has another image. She shared how her mother used to get their home ready for guests. She would comb down the fringes of the carpet, in each room, until there were no knots and perfectly straight. Taking her cues from her mother, Pastor Kathy writes "the Advent of guests prompts the host not only to straighten up, but also to fix things around the house – a broken doorknob, a loose towel rack, the burned-out lightbulbs, the leaky guest toilet." Preparing for company makes the hosts to look at their home, to examine their surroundings with a whole new perspective.

I doubt John the Baptist ever had to get ready for a houseguest, but he knew the most important guest for whom we could ever get ready to welcome. And I, who love to host, know preparing my home for company takes attention, energy and time. Are we ready to take the same, no, even more attention, energy and time, to prepare our hearts and minds for this special occasion, the arrival of our prince of peace?