

THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS

The Gift of Preparation

Text: Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 3:1-6

“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me”, says the prophet Malachi. And Luke quotes Isaiah, “The voice crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’”. Last week we were told to “be alert”. This week the imperative is “Prepare”.

Malachi raises a disturbing question for all who proclaim God’s arrival with joyful expectation. Are you ready? Do you know what it means? Who can endure it? In the prophetic tradition, the day of the Lord anticipates God’s victorious kingship and a period of righteous judgment. That’s why they describe the day of the Lord with such dramatic language, language that is both uplifting and fearsome. Depending on the context, it is the promise of deliverance or the threat of judgment. In fact, it is usually both elements at once. In either case, it is the might of God’s power that both comforts and disturbs.

Malachi is the last book of our Old Testament. It tempts us to move forward, following the words of the prophet, whose name means “messenger”. So our lectionary moves us to the Gospel of Luke, who has a penchant for situating his narrative amid the historical figures of the day. He was obviously a historian. To paraphrase his opening lines: “Despite Tiberius being Emperor of Rome, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Phillip and Lysanius being provincial governors, and despite Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, God chose to speak to a nobody named John living in the desert”.

Today we might say: “In the first year of President D, the high priesthood of James Dobson and Josel Osteen..ect, (you fill in the rest) there is still a need for the proclaiming of repentance and justice and forgiveness and righteousness”. There are plenty of crooked paths that still need straightening (repentance), too many poor valleys still need filling (forgiveness) and accumulated mountains needing lowering (repentance). Crooks with guns and fountain pens still need to go straight (forgiveness) while rough

violence calls for smoothing (repentance). All life is intended to find wholeness (forgiveness).

So we are told to prepare. This message comes from the rather unusual character named John the Baptist. I'd like us to note three things about John. First, he was an unusual messenger. We are told that he was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

I get the impression that John, who was the cousin of Jesus, was a little different. You probably have some people in your family that could be classified as a little different. There are just some folks who if you invited them to a social function you would feel a little uncomfortable to have them around. Well, John was like that. John was a man of the desert, he ate the food of the desert and he wore the clothing of the desert.

Not only was he an unusual messenger, but, he had an unexpected message. John fulfilled not only the prophecy of Malachi, but the more extensive prophecy of Isaiah. "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low. The crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed. And all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken".

John comes as a herald or an announcer that the Lord is coming, "prepare the way for the Lord". The word translated "prepare" can be used for making a thing ready or keeping it ready. John was not telling them to prepare a literal road, rather he is telling them to prepare themselves for the coming of Jesus. He says, "get ready!"

In our love of the celebration of the birth of Jesus, I think we sometimes get lost. We love to prepare for Christ because it's like preparing for a baby to be born. We get so wrapped up in the manger scene that we forget that Jesus is not a baby anymore! We

think that somehow he is satisfied to see us make our annual appearance at Christmas and sing a few Christmas carols. The one who was born into a crude manger is now a King! Our question today is: Have you prepared your hearts to receive Jesus?"

How are we to get ready? John tells us to get ready, to prepare, is to "repent". Malachi asks us "Who can abide the day of his coming?" The purpose of divine judgment is not to punish but to prepare the way of the Lord. It is to bring restoration and renewed life. It is to train the people in obedience to the covenant so that they may offer reverent praise. Malachi's proclamation may strike a discordant tone with our Advent expectations. Our preparations are often informed by the pastoral images of sweet baby Jesus surrounded by choirs of angels and placid sheep around the manger. Jesus brings serenity, peace on earth, goodwill to all. And while we can affirm that the coming of Jesus the Christ, the prince of peace, is good news of great joy for all people, this does not mean that Christ's presence demands nothing of us or leaves us unchanged. Like a refiner's fire and cleansing soap, the arrival of the Christ in our midst calls us to reverent obedience and faithful praise. The good news is that we will not be left unchanged but will be reformed and refined to become like Christ.

So, with all these admonitions from Malachi and John, just how are we to prepare for the coming of the Christ? Well, today I'm going to give you a few ideas, ideas that I hope might help you prepare your heart for Christmas.

First, *Reflect*. Take note of the many reasons you have to be thankful this Christmas. Spend time thanking God specifically for ways God has provided for you – spiritually, relationally, financially. Praise God for God's goodness, grace and faithfulness in all seasons of life.

Gather. Spend uninterrupted time with the people you love. If necessary, limit the activities and parties you commit to so that you may focus on time with your family instead. We often rush through our busy Christmas schedules and miss time to really be

present in the moments we are together with our loved ones. Make memories together as you celebrate Christmas.

Sing. This may seem a little silly at first, but spend time singing your favorite Christmas songs aloud. Pay close attention to the words, thanking God for God's incredible gift of our Savior. Sing these traditional carols as worship songs to the Lord.

Celebrate. Jesus, the One who holds all things together, entered the world in the humblest form – a small, helpless baby. Jesus' birth is the greatest gift we will ever receive and that is definitely a reason to celebrate! Embrace the joy found in the birth of Emmanuel – God with us.

Listen. Practice the art of truly listening to others as you gather with family and friends. Whether you're having dinner, opening presents, or sitting around and catching up with those you haven't seen in a while, pay attention to what is said instead of thinking about how you will respond. Truly listening is one of the best ways to show your loved ones that you care.

Remember. Reflect on the fact that our Jesus was born specifically so that he could usher in the kingdom of God. Thank him for his willingness to enter this messy, broken, hopeless world. Rejoice in the Father's love, reflecting on the reality that for much of the time we forget this unprecedented and unparalleled gift.

Enjoy. Christmas is a beautiful season – sparkling Christmas lights, decorations hung with care, memorable moments with family. Appreciate the little moments. Slow down long enough to delight in the beauty all around us.

Read. Study the story of Christ's birth. Instead of rushing through the reading of Matthew 1 or Luke 2, take time to meditate on the words. Read the passage slowly, taking note of the details you may have missed before. Notice new things as you read the story with fresh eyes.

Pray. Lift up those who do not know Jesus in prayer. Pray for the lost and the hurting. Ask God to open your eyes to opportunities to share the gospel with those around you – your family, friends, and even strangers. Pray for those who are all alone this Christmas; pray they will encounter Jesus and find hope in the One who loves them and will never leave them.

Worship. Above all, Christmas is the perfect opportunity for worship. Worshipping God encompasses so much more than simple singing. Worship is a way of life. This Christmas, seek to honor God with the way you live. Speak words that breathe life, not discouragement. Love the people in your life selflessly. Humbly serve your family. Praise God with the little moments in your daily life.

Malachi told us about a messenger who was coming. Luke introduced us to that strange messenger named John, and John told us about the one who was coming who would change the world. And, to be quite honest, God is not done yet. God continues to work through unlikely characters today – unpopular teens and out-of-work adults and corporate executives and stay-at-home parents and underpaid secretaries and night-shift workers and police officers and volunteer baseball coaches and even burned-out preachers – to announce the news of God’s redemption. God calls us to be God’s messengers in our crazy world. Are we prepared? Amen.