

Preparers of the Way
Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 3:1-6

“He went into all the region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins...”

While December is the month when simply everyone in the culture prepares to celebrate a holiday, Advent is the season when the church prepares to celebrate Christ’s first coming and to ready the world for Christ’s coming again. That is why, on the second Sunday in the season of Advent, the church alone listens to the words of two messengers sent by God to prepare the way. As you have heard, neither of these men suggest a tree be cut down and decorated or presents be bought and wrapped or parties be thrown and attended or feasts be cooked and consumed or carols be arranged and sung. Instead both messengers are stern and quite sober concerning what we ought to do and leave undone if we are to be ready for God’s arrival.

In the 5th century B.C., Malachi (which means “the messenger”) roars that God is drawing near for judgment: “I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.” Four hundred years later, John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. “You brood of vipers!” his rant begins. “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come...Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” I know what you are thinking. None of this sounds, well, very Christmas-y. Why these words and how do they prepare us for Christ’s coming?

Malachi, in the first place, is the last book in our Old Testament. This minor prophet was speaking to returned exiles, to Judeans who had never left the land and to Jews who had married Gentiles, all of them living together under Persian occupation. By the time he writes, a generation has been born and died since their return from Babylon. No doubt the memory of exile was fading. “Nothing faced Israel,” according to Old Testament professor Elizabeth Achtemeier, “but ‘the dailiness of life....’ [The people were] suffering under no persecutions that would fire up or steel [their] commitment. [They] had no nation attacking [them]...to prompt [their] concerted defense of faith and life.” In other words, they had grown so accustomed to life under Persian occupation that they were indistinguishable from the culture around them, the culture that embraced the spirituality de jure, that played fast and loose with the human heart, that could not tell the truth from a lie, that preyed upon the weaker members of society for their own gain and shunned the stranger, the culture that bowed down to power instead of love.

If Malachi were writing to us, his observation of the dailiness of our lives might lead him to say the same, say that there is not much difference between who we are as members of Christ’s church and as members of this society. He might notice that we are far more likely to take our cues concerning our values, our behavior, our aspirations and our human associations from the mores of social media or party politics than from a lively engagement with the biblical narrative or a significant involvement with those whom the society has shunned. He might observe that our hope for the future rises and falls with the stock market rather than with him who died and rose so that death and the death-dealing powers of this age would have no dominion. So in this season when we with the culture spend our time and money preparing for a holiday, Malachi urges us to ask ourselves: If God were to suddenly appear in this house, how would we endure the day of God’s coming and stand when he appears?

We endure and stand, Malachi says, by returning to God who will return to us. “How shall we return?” the Israelites asked and so do we. Without hesitating God roars, “Stop robbing me!” “How are we robbing you?” we wonder defensively. Mincing no words, God says “In your tithes and offerings...you are robbing me—the whole nation of you,” God says and so implies that returning involves communal righteousness more than individual piety, involves making room by relinquishing our stuff more than filling our houses with more stuff, involves self-giving love rather than self-serving piety. I repeat, these words are not very Christmas-y unless preparing for God coming near has something to do with turning and so returning our lives, our tithes, our time, our treasure and our love to the love who created, sustains and redeems us.

What might returning look like? Consider Hallie in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal Dreams* who has gone off to Nicaragua to aid the peasants and writes a letter to explain herself to her sister Codie back in the States:

Codie, here’s what I’ve decided: the very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof. What I want is so simple I almost can’t say it: elementary kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go

around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed. That's about it. Right now I'm living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides. I cannot tell you how good it feels. I wish you knew....I wish you knew how to squander yourself.

Do that, says the Lord of hosts. Prepare yourself for my coming by squandering yourself and your love on the other and "see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing....*Then* the nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts." Malachi's bottom line? Prepare for God's coming by returning all we are and offering all we have to the Love we meet in the dailiness of our lives. Then we will come to the manger weary in well-doing, empty-handed and ready to receive.

Luke prefaces his story of John's preparation for God's reign coming near by reminding us who was presently in power: Tiberius Caesar, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas. Luke relegates all of them to the subordinate clause of a long sentence whose subject is the word of God that came to John in the wilderness. The crowd to whom John spoke included peasants living hand to mouth, Jews collaborating with Rome to overtax their own and Jewish soldiers who did Rome's cruel bidding. All were people whose lives appeared to be at the mercy of the death-dealing hands that Luke mentions in salvation history's subordinate clause: the hands of Herod's incompetent brother who had ordered the slaughter of innocent baby boys around Bethlehem a few decades before in hopes of killing the newborn King of the Jews; the hands of Herod himself who will soon order John's imprisonment and deliver his sawed off head on a platter to his concubine's daughter for her birthday; and the hands of Pilate who will sentence Jesus to death with the permissive inaction of these very high priests.

Luke's point is, in part, that the word of the Lord which came to the John in the wilderness bypassed the powerful. The word sent John to go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. John's preparation involved baptism, a baptism of repentance, to change the heart and mind, to open the life of the baptized to God's future invading human history, to God's reign begun in Jesus Christ. On Wednesday at Bible Study we talked about the need for a baptism of repentance in this congregation—not to get ready for Christmas, but to get ready for the new thing God will do in sending the next minister to lead you. Open minds, open hearts, open lives must be prepared to receive. More about that in the New Year! For now, John is the preacher sent to prepare the way for the one whom to follow will require losing the life you are trying to live without him if ever you are to find your life.

Some say Luke could only have written the story of Christ's first coming—a story he apparently added to his Gospel after he finished writing the Book of Acts—from the vantage point of the church's hope in Christ's Second Coming. In Luke's mind as he writes Luke-Acts, the church is the baptizer, the preparer of the way, the messenger of God. Ever since Christ's resurrection and ascension, the church has been the community sent out to prepare the world for the embodied love of Christ that is always coming toward us. So in the first three chapters of his Gospel, Luke gives more verses to John's birth and beginning than to Jesus because in John Luke was thinking about the church baptizing and so preparing the world to be changed by love for love.

In response to John's baptism of repentance, the people ask what they are to do while they wait for God. John responds in the wilderness as the church will soon respond throughout the world saying: if you have two coats, give one away, if you have food, share it, if you are preying upon the poor, stop it, if you are threatening the vulnerable, cease and desist. It's so simple I almost can't say it: elementary kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around. We prepare the way for Love's return by insisting love be embodied in word and deed. Just so the church becomes "a cell of messengers and advocates in the world on behalf of the world's own future," Robert Jenson writes, "[a community that treats], in words and speaking deeds, each hope and fear as a hope for love's triumph...."

Though here in our present wilderness, now in this season of Advent, know that the child born in a manger alone is the preparer of our way to God. As he assumed the vulnerability of our own mortal flesh, as he dwells with us in the places where death still exercises dominion, so he goes before us in all things to prepare a place for us in the love that knows no end. We would not know where to turn or how or to whom in this present darkness were it not for the love that first turned toward us in Emmanuel, God with us. Thanks be to God.