

“A TIME TO PREPARE”
Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6
Second Sunday in Advent (December 6), 2009

Today’s theme in the scriptures is a theme that many of us can resonate with – preparation. Earlier this week, we received a dusting of snow that covered the ground, preparing us for the winter season that ‘officially’ begins in two weeks. Many people took advantage of the warm weather this fall to prepare the outside of their homes with lights and decorations in preparation for the Christmas season. Still others have been busy preparing their cards and letters – we received our first two Christmas cards this past week. All around us, people are busy preparing their homes and themselves for Christmas. But are we preparing our hearts?

That’s the question we are reminded of in the scriptures. The prophet Malachi proclaims, “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” That sounds like good news, until we read a bit further. Verse 3 says, “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”

This argument appears to be directed at those who have, as an earlier verse in Malachi puts it, “wearyed the Lord” with particular words. They have said either that God delights in those who do evil, or asked where the God of justice could be found. The prophet’s opponents are arguing – like Job – that it is not always the righteous who prosper.

This particular reading is a response to the question of God’s justice. There will come a time, and soon, when justice will be established. This is the Advent hope, and this is the good news.

The reading from Luke reinforces the message spoken by the prophet: there is no Advent without preparation. Luke introduces us to John, the son of Sarah and Zechariah. If we turn back to the end of the first chapter of Luke, we find Zechariah prophesying about his son. Listen to his powerful words:

“You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Knowledge of salvation...forgiveness of sins...light in the darkness...peace...again we find in ‘the preparer’ advent hope and good news.

But what is the message for us? The book of Malachi contains prophecies most likely delivered to the Jewish community in the early 5th century before the time of Christ. John was, as Steve Martin might say, “a wild and crazy guy” – dressed in camel’s hair and

eating locusts and wild honey – who carried a message of repentance to the people...a message that eventually led to his imprisonment and untimely death at the hands of Herod. What could their message possibly mean to us today?

If we take seriously their words, we find challenges or even commands to follow as we find ourselves in this time of advent – of waiting and anticipation and preparation for the return of Christ. Malachi's challenge is to be a people of justice.

Justice...it's a theme that echoes throughout the church. Another Old Testament prophet, Micah, says in chapter 6 verse 8, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Notice here how justice – setting things right between ourselves and others – is listed first. I read a quote recently from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that said, "True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice." And our own church's mission statement calls us to be a people who "work for justice where there is oppression."

Luke's challenge, which is really John's challenge (which was really spoken first by the prophet Isaiah), is to prepare the way of the Lord. The imagery used is the building of a road. This would be a familiar image to the people in Jesus' time, because when a king proposed to tour a portion of his kingdom, a decree was issued to prepare the roads.

The phrase I like to use in regards to this passage is accessibility. While we might wish more and more people were about the business of repairing roads, I think Isaiah is really talking about making our hearts accessible to the Promised One.

The prophet writes about making crooked paths straight, filling the valleys and lowering the mountains and hills, and smoothing out the rough spots. If we apply the road repair image to our lives, we ought to be asking ourselves if we have made the pathway between the Savior and ourselves accessible. Are there any crooked places in our lives that need to be straightened out? In other words, do we need to make a confession of our sin so that we can be forgiven? Do we need to fill the valleys of our lives? Do we need to bring out into the open those things that are dragging us down, weighing us down, so that we can receive the encouragement necessary to lift us out of the valley? Do we need to lower the mountains and hills? Do we need to humble ourselves, remembering that God is God and we are not? Do we need to smooth out the rough places in our lives? Do we need to get back on track with our prayer life, our scripture reading and study, our worship life, our Christian fellowship?

The good news is that we don't have to try to do these things alone. God is here, waiting to partner with you in whatever you need to work on in your life. The church stands ready to join you in your journey of faith, providing opportunities for spiritual growth. And you are surrounded by sisters and brothers in the faith who would be honored to share in your endeavors.

Preparation is hard work. But it is also necessary work. And if we do it well, we will find that we are ready to receive the Savior when he comes. But the other remarkable

thing is that, in the process, we will have bettered ourselves by learning some new habits that allow us to deepen our relationship with God. And we will have bettered the lives of others by seeking and promoting justice, by making things right between ourselves and others. Certainly, that makes our time of preparation well worth it! **AMEN.**