

Malachi 3:1-5

Be Prepared

Well, I've used the Boy Scout motto as the sermon title, even though all week long what I've really been thinking about is John the Baptist, the hippy John the Baptist, announcing the Lord's coming and singing "Prepare ye the way of the Lord," from the musical "Godspell." And here we are in Advent, a time for us to be preparing our hearts and minds for the coming of our Lord; in our passage, the coming of God's messenger, who prepares the way for God. Preparation is an important topic for this season, and it may help us to consider- or reconsider- our hopes and intentions for Christmas. I mean by that not what you want to do on Christmas, but what you want Christmas to be.

Should it be a season of special music and colored lights and hot spiced cider and visions of sugar-plums; should it be that time when you gather with family to eat and laugh and reminisce, to give and receive gifts; a time to pass down the traditions of your own childhood to your children and grandchildren? A time for watching the little ones as they anticipate a visit from the fat gentleman in the red suit? Yes, surely you want Christmas to be these things, and more- add your own favorite memories and your wishes for friends and family. These then, would be your goals for the Christmas season in your home.

But we should be honest, because what we want for Christmas may not be exactly God's goals for us, or for the church, or for the nation, or for the world. I don't think it matters to God if we open presents on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning- or any number of holiday traditions people get upset about- and sometimes they are tiny little things. Perhaps we should just say that God is glad when we give thanks for the child who has come to us, and when we share and celebrate together; when we laugh and give to one another, as a family or as a church, a society. Maybe we can say those are, at least, some of God's purposes for Christmas. And others may be found in this passage in Malachi.

I count four of God's purposes in chapter 3. Christmas Objectives we may call them, and the very first one is for us *to understand that the Lord is coming*. Verse 1, "the Lord will suddenly come to his temple." And rightly, we will think of the temple in Jerusalem, perhaps remember the story of Mary and Joseph bringing baby Jesus to the temple and offering sacrifices for the birth of their son; or the story of 12 year-old Jesus in the temple discussing religion with the scholars; or adult Jesus entering the temple in a fury and turning over the tables, throwing the money onto the ground, and driving out the people, shouting his complaint that God's house of prayer they had made into a hideout for plunderers and racketeers.

The Lord's coming is a good and great thing, but it can be difficult for us- like it must have been for the people in those days- because he comes to this special place, the temple, and that means his coming will challenge many of our religious feelings and experiences and expectations. This is the second objective, *to challenge us*: he is like fire and detergent, so that he refines and cleanses and purifies the practice of religion; verse 3 has it, "until they present right offerings to the Lord." For us that doesn't mean the sacrifices of turtledoves or lambs, or the perfect liturgy, but rather the offering of our hearts and lives, cleansed by the one who has come; hearts and lives dedicated to humble living and service to God.

Perhaps this second objective is defined by the third: God draws near to us *for judgment*. In verse 5 the Lord says he will be a witness against sorcerers and adulterers and liars, against those who cheat workers out of their wages, and who oppress widows and orphans and those who treat foreigners with disregard or with malice. In this third objective, maybe we can begin to see that much of God's purpose for us is social and interpersonal. The Lord comes into his temple, and as well, into the temple of our hearts. Certainly, the Lord is against impure and lazy religion, but then, so much of religion is simply relationship founded upon selflessness and love. In verse 5, the Christmas objective is right religiosity- God

is against those who do not fear him, he says- but we understand that right religion is also justice and fairness and compassion, and not so much concern over nativity scenes on the courthouse lawn. This is the challenge to each of us, that God may be against many of our actions and opinions, because some of them are just unimportant, and some of them are hateful. It can never be about “us versus them,” as we might hear from certain sources. The Christmas objective, the meaning of Christmas, is “us for them,” because God is for them. The Lord’s goal is to come and to convert us all into a people who fear and love God just as God has loved us.

And this is the fourth objective- if you’ll permit me to stretch the passage into the next verses- a call for God’s people *to repent*. “Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord in verse 7. A wonderful word of grace and forgiveness and hopefulness for those adulterers and liars and oppressors out there, and for sinners in here. Repent, for he has come and is close to us. Think, of all the dark centuries of human history, of oppression and killing and hatred and madness, tribal and national pride; think of the ways we so easily forgive ourselves, so readily justify our deeds and attitudes toward others. It ought to

make us profoundly sad. Even so, the Lord comes. And his forgiveness is available to us all: this is his promise, “I will return to you.”

But let us not think that the Lord has come to the temple, or to the church, and locked himself away in there. No, he is in the midst of relationships, among us every day, and calling to us in so many ways. In the strangest places and at the oddest times of our lives we can see God’s Christmas objectives at work uniting persons and peoples, and God’s messengers revealing divine love for us all; in the strangest places, like that night long ago in a quiet pasture under the midnight stars, when angels announced the good news of joy to all people (Luke 2:10), and peace for all the world (2:14); objectives like the promise to a frightened young Galilean girl that God would bring salvation and forgiveness and light to people in darkness and despair (1:77-79), and would lift up the despised and fill up the hungry (1:52-53); in so many ways God bringing perfect mercy, so that all people may rejoice and give him thanks.

The prophet continues in the following verses of chapter 3, writing that the way for the people to return to the Lord is to stop stealing from God. He states that their tithes and offerings are lacking and incomplete. We shouldn’t think that the nation

was cursed or that people were hurting because they didn't contribute exactly ten percent to the temple treasury or only because there was something wrong with their sacrifices; or that today there is suffering because we don't put enough in the church collection plate. No, the offering the Lord demands is a heart that gives itself to God, and shows compassion to others; the standard tithe may be one tenth of our earnings, but should be nothing less than one hundred percent of our life.

So, verse 10 has God speaking, "bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house," which should call to mind organizations like Helping Hands and Body of Christ. This is an obvious command that God's people care and provide for one another. And it comes with a promise: "Put me to the test," the Lord says, "and see if I don't open the windows of heaven for you, and pour down overflowing blessings." Here are given to us commandment and promise, but aren't they yet another Christmas objective of the Lord who comes: a demand we take responsibility for our sisters and brothers and neighbors, and show them love; a demand that we give ourselves to God so that God's blessings may fall upon all of us?

God's purposes are always for our benefit. Therefore, our objective for this season should be to benefit others, and to show kindness to all people, that they

may see- in us- the selfless love of the one who has come. And so, prepare the way for his coming into their lives.