

“Preparing the Way Isn’t Easy”
Malachi 3:1–4; Luke 3:1–6
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I realize that family practices vary, but we begin preparing our home for Advent and Christmas over Thanksgiving weekend. We get the tree up and start decorating it, place the wreath on the front door and arrange the window decorations. When I say “we,” I do mean “we” but, to be completely honest, Dana does most of this. I get everything out from the basement and garage and select the Christmas music to be playing in the background, unless there is a good football game on, but you get the picture. It’s just the two of us now, with Ian and Ali gone, the German shepherds do not help, but it’s our tradition.

It’s just been a bit more challenging this year. Hasn’t everything been during COVID? We won’t have as many people over because of the pandemic. We don’t know if, much less when, the grown-up kids are coming. So, it’s been harder to get up the energy. And then, we had this problem with the tree. We love live trees but are allergic to them. Even the dogs’ eyes water. So, we bought an artificial tree soon after moving here, one with the lights attached, which was the problem.

Every year some lights go bad and we have to find and replace them for all the lights to shine. This year there must have been fifty lights not in a row not shining. After an hour or so of losing our minds, if not our religion, we finally gave up and decided to get a new tree. It does have flashier lights, white and multi-colored with many options, but what a challenge it has been making the preparations this year!

But then, preparations are often challenging, and who ever said that preparing for the Christ, the real focus of this season, would be easy? We have a habit of sentimentalizing Christmas — both the birth and the baby Jesus. There is nothing sentimental about childbirth — about which I am not qualified, as a man, to say much, but I think I am safe in saying this. There is nothing sentimental about babies, precious as they are. I always laugh when we sing the line of the carol — the

cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes. Sure! And this baby, sweet though he is, grows up into a man who makes some pretty heavy demands of his followers.

I think of the scene in *The Lion King* when just after encountering the runaway lion cub Simba, Pumbaa says to his friend, “Hey, Timon, it’s just a little lion. Look at him. He so cute! Can we keep him?” Timon replies, “Pumbaa, are you nuts? We are talking about a lion; lions eat guys like us... He’s gonna get bigger.”

Well, Jesus is going to get bigger, he’s going to bring grace and truth, salvation for the world, but he is going to model a life of sacrificial love and call his disciples to follow him in the way of the cross. The news of this season is good, as good as it gets, but it is not all roses and sunshine. There is labor and sacrifice, repentance and transformation ahead. So, our preparations will not be easy.

John the Baptizer understands this. He is the first one called to prepare the way for Jesus. Their birth stories are intertwined as are their families and their ministry. John is the one who comes in ultimate fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah’s vision of a messenger crying out in the wilderness and preparing the way of the Lord, making straight his paths. In ancient times, a messenger would announce the coming of a great ruler and make sure the people were prepared to receive this ruler. John is tasked with performing these functions for the Messiah.

The announcement is easy enough. Preparing people to receive Jesus is quite another thing, given what kind of Messiah he is – one who will lay down his life for others, one who will call people not just to believe in him but to follow him, one who will shine the light of God’s truth on every aspect of human experience, Emmanuel, God-With-Us!

The prophet Malachi speaks of a messenger who will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. This sounds wonderful, but then, Malachi adds, “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 fullers’ soap, 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 (Malachi 3:2–3).”

Such is the nature of John's work. He must prepare people to receive the very embodiment of God's redemptive love, the hope for all creation walking among them. Are they ready for this? Do they not need a refiner's fire and fullers' soap? Past our reading today, John's preaching will make this clear as he calls people to a kind of repentance that involves a change in heart and a change of life. Their heritage won't help them. Their own faith is required if they are to receive the Savior of the world. And they have work to do.

Are we any different? Are we ready to welcome the Christ into our lives and world? Do we not have work to do, preparations to make?

Some of this work lies within us. It concerns the opening of our hearts, the softening of our spirits, efforts to embrace the Spirit of Christ more fully within our inner being not only so that we are more at peace with Christ but so that Christ is more at home in us.

This involves times of prayer, meditation and reflection. It benefits from shared times of worship, service and fellowship. Immersing ourselves in scripture, exposing ourselves to glorious sacred music and art, taking in the wonder of creation — all helps, as do other habits of spiritual discipline like *lectio divina* and journaling.

The key is doing everything we can to shape our inner lives, like an athlete would his/her body, so that we are more receptive to Christ. It requires letting go of thoughts, attitudes and habits that get in the way, and taking on thoughts, attitudes and habits that help. And it involves a change of heart that leads to a change of life, one that is never perfect but always seeks to grow in the context of grace.

I have shared with some of you a story about a boy in another setting. He had grown up in the church and, like many young people who do, had a growing understanding of who Jesus is and a desire to follow him. He also observed the rituals of the church including baptism, and so, one day he told his mother he was ready to be baptized.

She was happy to hear this, as any parent would be, but she wanted to make sure he understood what he was doing. So, she told him it involved asking Jesus into his heart. He said he was ready to do this. She said that was good, but if he did, this would change the way he

lived. With Jesus in his heart, he couldn't be mean to his brother. Leave it to a mother to cut to the chase! He said he was ready. So, I talked with him, his parents talked with him further, and eventually I baptized him. But sometime after the baptism, his mother observed him first arguing with and then hitting his brother. "I thought you asked Jesus into your heart," she said, to which he replied, "I asked him to get out."

It doesn't work this way. None of us is perfect, but we can't ask Jesus to come and go whenever we want to act in a way we know is displeasing to him. But while we may not ask him to get out of our hearts, we do think and act in ways we know are not worthy of our identity in him. We get inappropriately angry about things that don't matter, like other people's driving or a call in a game. We hold on to a condescending attitude about people because of their race, gender, age, identity, or disability. We demand the spotlight or the recognition. Preparing the way for the Christ involves making changes in our lives.

It also involves seeking change in the world around us. As we take in the news each day about our community, state, nation and world, do we have the sense that this is this kind of world where Jesus would feel at home, the kind of world he envisions? Is it a world where kindness and compassion prevail? Is it a world where no one is left out, where the hungry are fed and the stranger is welcomed? Is this a world where people and nations have laid down their weapons and used every ounce of energy they have to pursue peace and justice?

I remember a skit my youth group acted out years ago. Someone from another planet comes to visit the earth. She says her people visited thousands of years ago and weren't overly impressed, but they wanted to see what progress we had made. The earthers describe numerous technological advances like computers, air travel and medicine, but the traveler says her people made these advances long ago.

She is not impressed and she starts to leave when the earthers say, "Wait a minute, something special happened here 2,000 years ago — the Savior of the world, Jesus the Christ came to visit us!" "Jesus came to visit you," the traveler says, "Why, if he came to visit us, we would stop everything and throw a parade! We would bow down and worship him!"

We would do whatever he wants! What did you do?” The earthers glance at each other, lower their heads, and say, “We killed him.”

That is how we welcomed Jesus 2,000 years ago, and we would like to think that we would welcome him differently today, but would we? Have we shaped the kind of world he envisioned? Have we followed his most basic teachings about forgiveness and loving the enemy? Have we done everything in our power to pursue the kingdom or realm of God we pray for each week, or have we settled for believing some nice things about Jesus and focused on our hope for the next life?

There is much work yet to do in preparing the world around us for the coming of the Christ. As with our personal work, it is not easy. It involves confronting uncomfortable evils like racial injustice and human trafficking, poverty and violence, glorified self-interest that gets in the way of common-sense public health behavior and sensible gun reform. And it requires an understanding of how Jesus enters this world, and thus how he is likely to be at work in the world today.

As with the story of Jesus’ birth in Luke 2, the story we have read about John’s ministry in Luke 3 begins with historical notes — Augustus is Emperor and Quirinius is Governor of Syria. It is a way of placing John’s work in historical context, but it is also a way of noting where God is at work — not among the high and mighty but through some wild-eyed, locust-eating renegade son of a priest who is preaching out in the wilderness. As Jesus enters the world in the humble confines of an animal shed, John begins his ministry far away from the spotlight.

Why would we think that the God who was in Christ would ever work in any other way? If change is happening in the world around us, it may be in the resilience of third-world people in remote settings. It may be in the humble efforts of a volunteer in the clothing ministry or at Toy Joy. It may be in some act of kindness, simply befriending someone who is lonely, including someone who has been left out. When Christ comes, it is likely to be off the beaten path, which means we will have to know where to look, and this too is a part of the work of preparation.

Preparing the way for Jesus is not easy, but it is worth the effort, indeed, there is nothing more important or more fulfilling we can do.