

“Finding Magic in the Work We’re Avoiding”
Malachi 3:1–4; Philippians 1:3–11; Luke 3:1–6
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Coaches use all sorts of motivational language to inspire athletes, but I like a line a new coach at my alma mater used earlier this season. Quoting someone I don’t know, he said, “The magic you’re looking for is in the work you’re avoiding.” The magic you’re looking for is in the work you’re avoiding.

I like this line because it points to a critical lesson about sports. We’re only as good as the time and energy we are willing to invest in making ourselves good. Talent is essential, but accomplishment depends on a combination of talent and work. Everyone wants the flashy moments of success, but only those who put in the work have them.

But I also like this line because it points to a spiritual reality. In Christian tradition, everything begins with grace, but our experience depends on what we do in the context of grace. If we are looking for a deeper sense of peace, if we are hoping for a more just and kind world, if we want to experience some magic this Christmas, some holy magic, we don’t just sit down and wait for it to happen to us as if we are simply passive recipients of what the cosmos sends our way. We work toward these goals. We invest all that we have and are in their pursuit.

All of today’s texts point to this reality, but the truth is we would like to avoid the work that is found here. We think of this being a season of sugar and spice and everything nice. We just want the sweet baby Jesus in a manger. We want to sing a few familiar carols. Why do we have to read all this stuff about repentance? Why do we sing songs we don’t even know? Can’t we avoid all this stuff? Not if it’s where we find the magic we’re looking for.

So, what exactly is the work we’re avoiding? What is it we are called to do as we prepare for the coming of the Christ not just into a Bethlehem stable but into our hearts and lives and world?

Malachi speaks of a messenger who prepares the way for the coming of a redeemer, and this preparation is like a *refiner's fire* and *fuller's soap*. The Apostle Paul writes to the Philippians about love overflowing with knowledge and insight *so that* they can determine what is best and thus be found pure and blameless. In the reading from Luke, John the Baptist proclaims *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. All three texts point to some kind of work to be done, work that leads to the magic of embracing the God who is with us.

This work begins with self-examination. We cannot address a need for growth until we acknowledge it. And doing this requires some self-examination, a willingness to ask probing questions.

Commenting on the reading from Malachi, Presbyterian pastor Deborah Block notes that the question, “But who can endure the day of (the Lord’s messenger’s) coming?” is but one of twenty-two questions Malachi asks in the space of fifty-five verses (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, p. 26). Faith inevitably raises questions, and many of them are about us. The people who go to hear John the Baptist go with questions about their spiritual condition, whether they need the baptism of repentance he speaks about so passionately.

Block references a childhood story Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel told. When he was a boy, his mother would greet him every day when he came home from school with a question – not “What did you do today?” or “Whom did you talk to today?” but “Did you have a good question today?”

Some parents might ask, “Did you learn anything new today?” Ian was asked this by someone when he was young, and he replied, “Not anything I didn’t already know.” The writing was on the wall. But the point is – life is a process of learning, and often how we do this is not just through accumulating information but by asking questions.

So, what questions should we ask of ourselves? Some of them have to do with our inner journey, whether we are deepening our relationship with God. Over the years habits of spiritual discipline — like prayer, meditation, Bible study, *Lectio Divina*, journaling, walking the labyrinth — can become stale. But moving away from all discipline can be problematic. We can try to fool ourselves into thinking we are

beyond all that. We are not, though our needs vary over time. Change and growth begin with an honest assessment of where we are. Do we feel close to God? Do we need more structure to our faith, less structure, or something different?

We should also ask questions about our outer journey, our service to others. Again, over the years specific practices can become more or less fulfilling, and in this church, opportunities abound! Becoming a White Flag shelter has provided a host of new possibilities, and this past Tuesday evening our church met a need in a way that inspired everyone involved. We issued a last-minute call to assemble roughly seventy cots so that the women being sheltered wouldn't have to sleep on the floor. We hoped for a few volunteers. Over forty people showed up! It was the church at its best, the Body of Christ extending compassion.

Yet the needs of this ministry will only grow over time, we have many other ongoing ministries to continue, and our motivation for any one specific avenue of service may wax and wane. But the needs will always be there, as will our calling to be of service and find Christ in the midst of it. Where are we now? How are we giving of ourselves to others? Are we fulfilling our calling?

And in addition to questions about our inner and outer journey, we might ask questions about our daily conduct. Is there anything in our manner of life that does not honor the Christ in whose name we were baptized? Some habit or tendency, the way we treat other people, how we fill most of our time, how we spend our money... is there anything displeasing to our God? Most of us don't need to be told where our growing edges are, but we do need to acknowledge them.

And we might ask similar questions of the world around us, especially our privileged culture. What is the state of our national life? What do we value most? How are we treating the poor and most vulnerable? Are we aware of what a profound influence we have on the entire world? Are we moving forward or backward in honoring the Declaration of Independence's claim that all people are created equal?

A prayer of confession expresses what many find to be true. "We live casual lives, ignoring your promised judgment. We accept lies as truth, exploit neighbors, abuse the earth, and refuse your justice and

peace.” If this is the condition of our world, we need to acknowledge it. It is part of the work that might lead to the magic of Christ’s coming.

And yet, the work of preparation does not stop with self-examination and acknowledgment. It includes a willingness to make changes. John proclaims a baptism of repentance. Repentance isn’t simply feeling badly about something in our lives or world; it’s doing something different, making a change in direction.

Acknowledging a problem without doing anything about it does not lead to the magic of embracing more fully the God who is with us. It’s like what the NCAA does with basketball officiating every year. They have points of emphasis like stopping contact that impedes freedom of movement. They make a big deal of the obvious, they say they are going to make changes and may even do so at random times early on in the season, but they never make a real change when it matters. This serves no good purpose. It’s like admitting we do something destructive in a relationship but still doing it.

John calls us to repentance as we prepare for the coming of the Christ, to make changes in our lives and world. This means developing habits of devotion and taking on new paths of service. This means treating others with more kindness and curtailing any habit that weakens our witness. It means fighting for a culture in which love casts out fear, compassion overwhelms self-interest, commitment to truth and civility displaces all the lies and meanness. We often pray for Christ to come so that we might know peace. If we work passionately for peace where and how we can, we may find that Christ comes in the process.

I realize all of this sounds like a lot of work, which it is. Repentance is work, change is work, preparing for the coming of the Christ is work not because Christ won’t accept us as we are, but because Christ deserves better. It’s like cleaning up the house for guests who know us and know how we keep a home. We’re not trying to fool them into thinking we are better than we are. We are trying to convey how much we think of them. So, it goes with our preparations for Christ.

But it is not all work and no play, all preparation and no joy. Perhaps Paul’s words to the Philippians can help us here. He prays that

their love may overflow with knowledge and insight so that they can determine what is best and thus be found pure and blameless. Sometimes that's how repentance works, through love. As Frederick Buchner once said, repentance is less about saying, "I'm sorry," to the past than saying, "Wow!" to the future.

I have often said, though perhaps never from a pulpit, that churches are a lot like two-year olds. You don't get the two-year-old to stop playing in the toilet by saying, "Stop that!" You attract the two-year-old to the block table.

Churches are like this. We are like this. It's maddeningly difficult to stop wasting our lives on toilet-worthy or at least unfulfilling behavior. But it's not difficult to join in when it's time to assemble cots for sisters in Christ who need a warm, comfortable place to sleep. It's not difficult to help a neighbor find clothing on a Monday morning. It's not difficult to sing great hymns at a Hanging of the Greens service and share food and memories with people dear to us afterward.

When we get caught up in the practice of love, all other ways of being lose their allure. We are pulled toward something better. That's repentance but a magical kind, work but work we are thrilled to do.

The magic we're looking for is in the work we're avoiding. The magic of Christmas... God-With-Us, Christ in our hearts and lives and world... is in the work of self-examination, repentance, and love. Let's quit avoiding it, get to work, and experience some magic!