

Love the Rose
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Malachi 3:1-4

1 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ² 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 like fullers' soap; ³ 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. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:1-6

1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’

Nicholas Herman, who later became the monk known as Brother Lawrence, is said to have looked at a barren tree in the deep of winter, stripped of its leaves and its fruit. He suddenly “grasped for the first time the extravagance of God’s grace and the unfailing sovereignty of divine providence. Like the tree, he himself was seemingly dead, but God had life waiting for him, and the turn of seasons would bring fullness.”¹ Writer Anne Lamott describes his revelation this way: “He struggled with his faith until one day he saw the barren trees in winter as an epiphany: that God sees us and the trees, with no leaves, nothing to bedazzle, no fruit on our branches to earn our keep, as being gorgeous, cherished, latent with an explosion of the life and beauty and fruit that will magically come in the Spring.”²

Gorgeous, cherished, latent with an explosion of life and beauty. It’s not so long ago that we were celebrating the harvest, still picking, or enjoying in season, late fruits and winter vegetables and yet

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/innertravelers/brotherlawrence.html>

² <https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott/posts/250930178369966>

we are already encouraged to be looking forward to new life springing forward on branches which are so newly bare. Our hymn says, “Furrows, be glad. Though earth is bare, / One more seed is planted there // Love the rose is on the way.” And that barrenness is repeated in different ways in our readings. In Malachi, the refiner’s fire and fullers’ soap strip away all non-essentials. Luke adapts Isaiah who said not “A voice cries out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord” but “A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” The wilderness – yet another form of barrenness.

We ready our homes and our hearts for Christ but God’s act of love in Christ, and any other of God’s acts of love, do not rely on our having made ready. As Dr. Seuss’ Grinch so astutely observes, “He HADN’T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME! Somehow or other, it came just the same! ..It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes, or bags! ...Maybe Christmas...doesn’t come from a store. Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!”³ Just as the Grinch could not stop Christmas, we cannot cause it to happen. As theologian Seth Moland-Kovash says, “God’s promise of covenant restoration happens outside of our control. It is God’s promise and God’s restoration. It will happen, in God’s way and whether we are ready for it or not.”⁴

Moland-Kovash is speaking in reference to the people being purified as with the refiner’s fire and fullers’ soap but the same can be said for the coming of Christ. We read through Isaiah in Luke, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” And it continues, “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” It is not in our preparation that we cause the valleys to be filled and the mountains and hills to be leveled. It is not in our preparation that the crooked shall be made straight and the rough smooth. It is not in our preparation that all flesh shall see the salvation of God. No, these, these are the works of God. God’s response in the book of Job is all we need to remind us that such power rests with God alone: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ...Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? ...What is the way to the place where the light is distributed, or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth? Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt...?”⁵

What then are **we** to do? We hear a list of names in association with the proclamation of John, the one who baptized, because it was tradition to name the setting of the prophets of old, that the hearer might understand where in history the prophet stood. To Luke, John is indeed a prophet. The prophets acted to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. John offered comfort to the afflicted, the people of Israel who were under Roman rule, who wished for oppression to end, who wished their land

³ *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, Dr. Seuss Storytime (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 99-100.

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 29.

⁵ Excerpts from Job 38-39.

to be returned to them. And so John proclaims his words of hope and promise: “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” This goodness is coming. The salvation of God is coming. The people of Israel, and us, are to prepare the way of the Lord not so the Lord will come but so that we will be ready and present to receive the Lord when he does come. We are not the ones to do the purifying as with fire and lye but we are to make ourselves ready to be purified.

Malachi asks, “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” We’ve heard this question in many ways. In the book of Revelation, the question is who is worthy to open the scroll. We know that none of us can claim worthiness. Pastor Deb Block has summarized it well: “Advent questions our worthiness, readiness, and willingness for Christ’s coming.”⁶ We cannot claim worthiness. I most definitely do not feel ready, with Christmas cards waiting to be written, and a Christmas Eve service to finish planning. But even beyond these material tasks, I cannot say with honesty that I am ready in my spirit to receive Christ. And as for willingness, are you ready for fire and lye? Perhaps you can think of people who could stand to be purified more than you and sooner than you, but none of us is exempt from the need to be refined and washed clean. How willing are we to let go of the things which will fall away in the refining, which will be washed away with the soap?

What then are we to do? John’s message of a baptism of repentance, of turning toward God instead of away **is** the key to worthiness, readiness, and willingness. We want Christmas to be a warm fuzzy time, oh, do we. We want to snuggle the baby, to gaze upon its sleeping, peaceful face, to marvel at its very presence. This baby, this Jesus, though, isn’t **only** a baby to us but also our savior, also the one who has already broken bread with sinners, who healed the hurting, who stood up in love over the law, who died on a cross, who defeated death through resurrection. So the warm fuzzies of the birth of the child must also come with the not-so-fuzzy recognition of why the incarnation occurred in the first place.

The third chapter of Luke continues past our reading today: John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “...Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham...And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them. ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’” To the tax collectors he said, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” To the soldiers he said, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” John’s message to turn back was a message to keep no more for yourself than needed. This is wisdom across the ages. Not only do you

⁶ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 28.

turn more toward God when you are not turned toward extraneous stuff, but you are turned more toward God when you are turned toward other children of God. What then are we to **do**? Make it easier for you to turn toward God – part with those things which cause you to stumble as you turn to God; part with those things which cause your vision of God to be obscured; part with those things of which you have two and another child of God has none. Prepare the way of the Lord, prepare room for the rose, prepare!

Let us pray: God, we are not worthy, ready, or willing, and yet you are coming. Help us to prepare ourselves to receive you. Amen.