

The Lord Whom You Seek  
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**Malachi 3:1-4**

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup>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; <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>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**

<sup>1</sup> 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, <sup>2</sup>during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup> 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;

<sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' '

The hymn we'll soon sing includes the verse: "Fling wide the portals of your heart; make it a temple, set apart from earthly use for heaven's employ, adorned with prayer and love and joy."<sup>1</sup> In both of our readings we have heard about preparing the way – "prepare the way before me" and "prepare the way of the Lord." This command of preparation is for us but, make no mistake, preparation doesn't need to happen in order for the Lord to come. Preparation happens for us to receive.

One of my favorite books as a child and still today is *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. For those not familiar with it, Mary, an orphaned "tyrannical"<sup>2</sup> girl who had been raised in India, was sent to live with family, an absent widower uncle and, Colin, a sickly, tantrum-throwing cousin, at their estate in England. Colin stayed to himself and had been pitied so much about his health

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<sup>1</sup> *Glory to God, #93 Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates*

<sup>2</sup> Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (New York: Dell Publishing, October 1979) p. 2.

that he was certain he was soon to die. Mary was a curious, as well as “sour,”<sup>3</sup> child. With her uncle traveling the world to avoid the heartbreak of his wife’s death and the angst of his son’s illness, Mary had as companions the staff at the manor, however she didn’t want to play so much as order them around, as she had done in India. The wise Yorkshire country folk who worked at the manor knew what was better for her and sent her outside to explore. In her explorations she uncovered the key to a garden which had been closed up since her aunt had died.

With the guidance of Dickon, a Yorkshire lad, Mary began to secretly tend to the secret garden, bringing it back to life – clearing grass so tender shoots of crocuses could come up unhindered, pulling weeds, and generally loving it – each day looking more and more forward to being in it. Over time she came to meet and know her cousin and, having seen how much she had changed in the garden, she insisted on wheeling his wheelchair out into the garden in hopes he might improve, too. Colin experienced the magic of helping a garden come to life and began to challenge himself physically in ways in which everyone else had been afraid. Hodgson Burnett sums up the whole of the story nicely near the end: “...the secret garden was coming alive and two children were coming alive with it.”<sup>4</sup>

The garden was still alive despite being ignored for ten years – it would blossom and bloom however it could with or without Mary and Colin. But through their patient and loving preparation, they received the joy of new shoots and abundant fruits and they received new life. The Lord is still alive, blossoming and blooming, and when we pay attention, when we lovingly prepare the way before the Lord, then we are far more ready to receive, and even notice, how it is that God is bursting forth new life. It could be easy to think that the purpose of our preparation is to receive the Lord but Pastor Wesley D. Avram explains, “The imagery [of straightening paths and filling valleys] is best taken at a step removed, so that the prophet’s call is to the *action* of making, opening, and clearing the way for God, rather than to some fixed image of the *result* of that work.”<sup>5</sup> The journey not the destination. The Lord will be coming, but not as a result of our actions. Through our actions, though, we can be better prepared for the arrival of the one whom we seek.

We do these things, so that we might get closer to God while God is already reaching out. Pastor Avram says of the words from Isaiah in our reading in Luke, “Here is dramatic imagery for making connection, for finding available means to communicate so that God’s desire for creation might be known: straightened paths, valleys and mountains made into plains, rocky ways made even.”<sup>6</sup> If you’ve ever driven through eastern states, especially on their highways, you will have undoubtedly noticed the

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<sup>3</sup> Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (New York: Dell Publishing, October 1979) p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.

<sup>5</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 46.

striations and layers of rock on either side of the highway, exposed when heavy machinery came through to break way for the road through the mountain. We are accustomed to straight paths and smoothed ways but a sure obstacle in ancient days was a deep valley or a high mountain which could not be easily cut through. We might consider a modern instruction to be to remove a detour or maybe to clear a fallen tree from a road. However we understand the obstacle, in terms of our faith, it is something that slows the Lord down from reaching us.

The people then, just as people now, were seeking a righter of wrongs. They offered their plea by declaring what the Lord would do – refine and purify, bring out the good from something which can be considered mixed with both good and bad. How frequently we find ourselves looking for good news in the wake of bad news delivered, whether that be good news amidst the bad or good news separate from the bad! How frequently we have been seeking good news of late – praying for God to be both a comforter and a righter of wrongs. Praying, communicating with God, is what God desires. God desires something else as well. Teresa of Avila, who lived in the sixteenth century (1515-1582), wrote a poem to define this “something else,” called “Christ Has No Body.”

Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.<sup>7</sup>

We start with ourselves, straightening the paths within us, making mountains low, removing obstacles with repentance and asking for forgiveness of the obstacles we have placed. Professor Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen teaches that “Etymologically the word translated ‘forgiveness’ comes from a Greek word meaning ‘to let go.’ Only God has the authority and power to let go of our sins; the humble and obedient response to the call to repentance is yes to God’s reaching out to us to deliver us from evil.”<sup>8</sup> There are many who have spoken of the power of “yes” – improvising actors live and breathe by it, actor and producer Shonda Rhimes has just had a book published called *Year of Yes* documenting how she went from succeeding to flourishing.<sup>9</sup> The most important yes is the one we give to God.

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa\\_Of\\_Avila\\_Christ\\_Has\\_No\\_Body.shtml](http://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body.shtml)

<sup>8</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/5-lessons-new-shonda-rhimes-book-year-yes-n464246>

Now that I use a GPS app pretty regularly I get to see what's coming on the road and every so often, the straight road, will swing out and then back. In central Illinois when this happens, there is almost always a family farm there. In Kenosha County it's often a very high and rocky hill. I fully understand the unwillingness of a family to give up land that has been passed from generation to generation to make way for a road, and the desire to avoid the loss that would come with that change. And when a high and rocky hill presents itself, sometimes it's just easier to go around it. What if it is God, and not the highway department, asking you to make way for a straight path? Asking you to lose something for something else? Asking you to do the difficult thing? The Lord whom we seek is coming – may we let go of the obstacles which have become comfortable, and may we say yes, so that we might receive our king.

Let us pray: Lord, help us to prepare the way for you, we pray. Amen.