

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. (Malachi 3:1-4)

How Can We Prepare for Christ?

What do you do to prepare for the holidays? Hit the “Black Friday” sales? Put up Christmas lights? Plan meals? What if you have people coming for the holidays, what do you do? If your in-laws are flying in from somewhere, how much preparation does it take to have the house ready for them? If they’re going to be here for a while, it might take quite a lot. The funny thing about that kind of preparation is that the people who are coming might not even notice it. You may never hear someone tell you, “Oh, your house is so clean!” On the other hand, they probably would notice if it weren’t. You would be mortified. Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is a season of preparation. In our readings for today, we hear about John the Baptist preparing the way for the Lord. Does the preparation that John did and that he called God’s people to do tell us anything as we prepare not just for guests and presents and parties, but as we prepare our hearts to again celebrate our Savior’s birth? My friends, **how can we prepare for Christ?**

I.

By preaching repentance. The word of God we have before us today comes from the very last book of the Old Testament. God foretells two comings. He says, **“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.** The first coming that he mentions is that of “my messenger.” That’s John the Baptist. He comes “to prepare the way before me.” Who’s speaking? The LORD himself. The messenger prepares the way for God himself to come. Of course, that is Jesus coming. Once that messenger has come, suddenly another messenger will come, the messenger of the covenant. That’s Jesus, too. He is the one speaking and he tells us about his own coming.

That coming will be “sudden.” That’s a funny way to describe something that the Jewish people had been waiting for since the time of Abraham. But if you think about what happened, you can see what God meant. John the Baptist came and everyone wanted to hear him preach. Even people who didn’t believe him wanted to be baptized by him. The whole nation was asking, “Could this be the Messiah?” While all eyes were on him, hardly anyone noticed the carpenter’s son from Nazareth who showed up one day to be baptized. He came out of nowhere but his preaching and teaching did eclipse John’s. That’s what was supposed to happen. John was preparing the spiritual ground for Jesus. Jesus was a true messenger of the new covenant – the promise that God would take our sins away. Jesus came and announced that covenant was here. Then he died and rose to make it true.

John pointed to a Savior who was about to arrive. What preparation is there left for us to make today? Jesus is still coming. He comes into our hearts through the gospel. So God still calls us to do what John did: prepare people’s hearts to see Jesus as their Savior. How do we do that? By proclaiming the same message that John proclaimed. We can summarize John’s preaching with one word: “repent.” Do we see our own sin for what it is? Do we see the words we’ve spoken or things we’ve done that break God’s law? Have we taken things that aren’t ours? Said things that aren’t true? Failed to do the good things we’re supposed to do? Each of us should review our church attendance and the way we treat our spouse or parents or co-workers. Each of us should examine how careful we are with other people’s reputations. We all will find words and actions that we can only be ashamed of, because they are not the holy words and actions God calls us to.

But it goes even deeper than that: have we loved God with all our heart? Have we put him first in our lives? Have we been guilty of sinful thoughts and hard-hearted attitudes? Have we been judgmental and unfair,

even if we never did or said anything to show what was going on in our hearts? Our hearts are utterly sinful and that sin corrupts all that we think and feel and so it also corrupts all that we do and say.

Seeing that is the first part of repentance. Just as God called John to confront his people with their sin so that they were prepared to embrace their Savior, so God calls us to confront sin and call each other to repent. If I don't do that faithfully and clearly and lovingly, I don't deserve to be your pastor. If I make excuses for sin, if I just try to get along with everybody and let things slide because we don't want to fight about stuff like that, then I should be removed from my office. The same is true for our teachers. The call to repent is essential to all our ministry. Now, no one likes to see their sin for what it is. I hate it as much as anyone. But we cannot grow in faith, we cannot cling to Christ, we cannot take comfort in his love and forgiveness unless we understand just what he has freed us from. If a doctor were to invent a drug that instantly cured cancer and then he went around randomly giving it to people, it's possible that people who never knew they were sick would be cured. But would they appreciate his efforts if they thought that they were healthy the whole time? Probably not. But someone who was in hospice care and had been told there was nothing else that could be done would talk about that miracle cure for the rest of their life.

The ministry of this congregation begins with confronting sin. But it is not the heart of our ministry. It isn't even all there is to repentance. The heart of repentance and of our ministry is the gospel. John proclaimed that the kingdom of God was near. Jesus was already in the world and was about to reveal himself. He was already living the perfect life that no sinner could have ever lived. He was already loving the Lord with all his heart and soul and so he was already being perfect in every word and action, in every thought and feeling. He was standing in the place of all God's Old Testament people and all of us, his New Testament people. When he was done, his holy, perfect life would be entered into God's record behind the name of every person who would ever live. That includes you and me.

Then Jesus would die for all those ways that we haven't loved God perfectly, for all the selfish actions and loveless words, for all the evil thoughts and lustful feelings, for the sin that infects us since the day we were born and that we have acted on more times than we can remember. Jesus would die and pay for it all. My friends, Jesus has died and paid for it all. And it is all washed away in his blood. He rose to tell us that. We are absolutely forgiven. God counts us all as perfect in his sight. Everyone who knows that and trusts that will reach eternal life. The end all and be all of our ministry here at Peace is to proclaim Christ, because trusting in his forgiveness is the whole point of repentance. Repentance is not done when we beat ourselves up over our sins. It's done when we cling to Christ and know that we are forgiven and so we are set free from the agony of guilt that we all face. My friends, be free. Be at peace, because Jesus did all that for you. You will live with him forever.

II.

We prepare hearts for Christ by proclaiming law and gospel, sin and grace. That's how unbelievers become believers and it's how believers grow. That points to the result of the preparation. If you have in-laws flying in for the holidays, you're going to plan and prepare. If that includes cleaning the kitchen and the bathrooms and making beds and wrapping gifts, you expect that after doing those things, the kitchen and the bathrooms will actually be clean and the beds will actually be made and the presents will actually be wrapped. Imagine how shocked you would be to stay half the night doing all that stuff and then you get up in the morning and find it all undone. The same is true for our spiritual preparation. Hearing law and gospel change us permanently. **How can we prepare for Christ? By living in repentance.**

Malachi says, **"But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap."** Even in his first coming Jesus came to purify his people. He came to call them back to the Lord, to live in true repentance. Whenever he comes into the heart of any person in this life, he is working to purify them. Malachi uses two images for purification: a refiner's fire and a launderer's soap. You ladies know that we rate gold's purity. 20 carat gold is more pure than 14 carat gold. More impurities have been burned out. 24 carat gold is the purest we can make it – the refiners fire has done its job. The other image Malachi uses makes the same point: launderer's soap. The Hebrew really talks about bleach. Bleach whitens cloth; it removes all the dirt and stains.

God sent Jesus to make us his people. And once we are his, Jesus makes us 24 carat Christians, Christians who live like their sin is bleached away. What does that have to do with repentance? If you are truly sorry for sin and if you truly trust that Jesus took that sin away, what effect must it have on your life? Does it

lead you to say, “Hey! I can do anything I want to because I’m forgiven.”? Does it lead you to say, “I’m going to go ahead and do this sin because I’ll be forgiven afterwards. I’ll just say I’m sorry to God then.”? No! If you’re thinking like that, you’re not sorry at all. You are not repentant.

True repentance always leads us to turn away from sin. It always strives to think and feel differently, to speak and act differently. So obviously, if I’m repentant, I stop the sin now. Other fruits might include working to restore broken relationships and to repay what others lost because of my sin. It might even include confessing to a crime. But all those fruits come from a desire to turn from sin. Now, that doesn’t mean we’ll be perfect. Someone might struggle mightily against temptation, but be very weak and sin again. The only thing they can do then is repent again and then practice another fruit of repentance: fleeing from temptation, that is, avoiding situations that you know will lead you to sin.

Our ministry needs to include encouraging each other to bring forth fruits of repentance. We need to assure each other that we’re forgiven and help each other struggle against the sins that are particularly difficult for each one of us. We need to stand firm when people try to avoid repentance but do everything in our power to build up those who are struggling with their own sinful weaknesses. God gives us congregations and the ministry to help us do those things.

What is the result? Malachi talks about bringing pure offerings to the Lord. Certainly, that includes our monetary gifts. But the check you write to church does not make you holy. The fact that you’ve given lots of money doesn’t give you a “pass” when it comes to your congregation’s discipline. Rather, it is your repentant heart that makes your offerings precious in God’s sight. If God has your heart, every hour that you spend here is a pure gift to him. Every hour that you spend serving on a board or a committee or helping in any way with our congregation’s work, every hour that you spend teaching your own children to know the Lord is a pure gift to God. Every time you give to the poor, every time you work faithfully at your job, or strive to be a good neighbor, you are bringing a gift to the Lord. All the fruits that spring from your faith and repentance are pure and holy offerings, because Christ makes them pure and holy in God’s sight.

God treasures those gifts because God treasures you. He loved you so much that he prepared the world for thousands of years so that Christ could come when the time was right. He loved you so much that Jesus lived and died and rose again to make you his. He loved you so much that he poured out the Holy Spirit on the church at Pentecost and sent it to the ends of the earth with that good news, and he found you and gave you faith and brought you into a congregation where you can hear that good news and grow. He loved you so much that he works in your heart so that you can bring him rich gifts of repentance and love. He calls every one of those gifts perfect, no matter how disappointed we might be with how they come out. God loved you. That message prepares our hearts and does even more. It gives us Jesus. He is yours today. Amen.