

The repeated refrain of our texts today is this: prepare ye the way of the Lord! In biblical times, when a ruler came to town, they would send a messenger ahead of them to announce their coming, so that the people could prepare – they would clean up the streets, removing the garbage, filling the potholes, whitewashing the walls, doing a preliminary sweep for bandits and hecklers – so that the king or governor would receive a fitting welcome and bestow favor on the people.

Really, this ancient custom captures a basic human impulse: we all do this all the time! When someone's coming over to your house, you straighten up! And what you straighten up and how much you straighten up depends on who's coming. If it's the UPS man, you put pants on before answering the door. If it's your friend with allergies, you stick the dog or the cat in their crate. If Grandpa isn't very steady on his feet, you clean up all the cars and trucks and legos off the floor. If it's your best friend, you might not straighten anything up; you might just get the coffee ready, or grab a bottle of wine.

But here's the incredible question raised by today's texts: What do you need to do to get ready for *God* to come? What's the right way to prepare for the Lord? First of all, it's amazing to even consider that the God of the universe would visit us at all, but's that exactly what the birth of Jesus is all about: "Savior of the nations, come. Virgin's Son, make here thy home!"

And if we didn't have these passages to guide us, we might react like some people do and say, "God will just have to take me as I am." What God sees is what God gets! But Malachi tells us that that's a disastrous approach: "Who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire." You *must* prepare, you *must* get ready!

This isn't because God is looking for people to smack around when He comes; far from it! As Luke reminds us in his quote from Isaiah, God comes to bring salvation! And so the messenger goes before him so that the people will be ready to receive *salvation*. It's as if God were bringing the water of salvation to a people living in a desert, and His messenger runs ahead, telling everyone to go get their biggest buckets. If there's a hole in your bucket, you'd better prepare for God's coming by fixing your bucket! If the first time you check for leaks is only after the water's been poured in, it's too late.

Sending a messenger is an act of mercy, so that you can prepare to receive salvation, so that nothing stands in the way between you and God. If you aren't prepared, then you won't endure God's coming. If you *do* listen to the messenger and prepare, however, then hear Zechariah's list of the blessings that God brings from Luke 1: redemption, salvation, fulfilled promises, deliverance from enemies, covenant mercy, the ability to serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness to the end of your days, sins forgiven, light in our darkness, and having our feet guided into the way of peace. God wants to *bless* you when He comes, and so He sends His messenger to get you ready. And if Zechariah tells you anything, he's telling you to get a bigger bucket to hold all these blessings!

So let's listen to what these passages have to say about preparing the way of the Lord. First, we'll look at Luke 3:1-6, which I've titled: "Preparing the Path".

In a time when God's people were being ruled over and led by a motley crew of Gentiles and rascals, the Word of God comes to John the Baptist, and here's the message: "Your sins have made you dirty; wash up before the Lord comes! Sin has made your life like a winding rocky road through hills and valleys. How is God supposed to bring you salvation when you've put all these obstacles in His way? Repent and be baptized, so that the Lord's way will be level and straight. Now, John isn't telling them to save themselves, but to take advantage of God's means of cleansing. This baptism of repentance prepares the people and the path for salvation to come.

So before we leave Luke 3 for Malachi 3, this is the lesson that John the Messenger has for us: **prepare the way of the Lord by repenting of your sins**. Repentance prepares God's people to see the salvation of God. And so if you are listening to God's messenger, then you will take some time this week to examine your heart and repent.

One way to do this, which I encourage you to do, is to think through all of your relationships and responsibilities, and repent right down the line: repent as a citizen of a sinful nation, repent as a Christian of the sins of the church, repent as a spouse, a parent, a child, a friend, a neighbor, and as an individual standing before a Holy God. Fill the valleys that sin has dug, make the mountains of disobedience low. Make your crooked life straight by repenting of your sin, and asking God for mercy for Jesus' sake. That's how to prepare the way of the Lord.

Now, having repented, we can move on to Malachi 3:1-4, and prepare to please God. It might sound like more of the same, since repentance isn't a one-time thing, but an all-the-time thing, but let me see if modifying Malachi's illustration makes it clear. The first messenger that Malachi speaks of was John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus, the "messenger of the covenant" from the second half of Mal. 3:1.

And John's ministry, as Luke said, was preparation through repentance, and you can think of your initial repentance, where you first put your trust in Jesus, as the time when you were transformed from a hunk of dirt and rock and dross into gold. At your conversion, God changed you! You're not a rock anymore; you're gold! But Malachi asks: are you *pure* gold?

No, not yet. You've been definitively *changed*, but you aren't *perfect* yet. And so when the Lord Jesus comes, He comes as a *refiner*, one who takes gold and smelts it down in the fire to purify it. And before our chemical tests were invented and the karat scale was in place, the refiner would sit by the fire, scraping off the impurities that bubbled up until he could see his reflection clearly in the liquid metal. That's a great image, isn't it? Your Christian life after you trust in Jesus is all about being refined and purified, until Jesus sees Himself clearly reflected in you.

And as the last part of the passage tells us, the goal of this refinement is righteousness. God is making you righteous; He's sanctifying you, so that your offerings of worship and praise, and so that the offering of your whole life to God *will be pleasing in His sight*. And so here's the point from Malachi: **Being refined by Jesus prepares you for a life that pleases God.**

Now, that *outcome* is great, but the *process* is painful: God throws us into the fire! The two main ways that God refines us are through our struggle to overcome the sin that remains in our hearts, and as we endure the suffering that enters our lives as we follow Jesus. Because both of these things are hard and painful, what Jesus calls "dying to self" and "taking up our cross", we are constantly tempted to avoid them. But our love for Jesus and our desire to prepare His way strengthens us for the purifying fire.

And so seeking and welcoming that refining process, rather than avoiding it or complaining about it, is how you prepare the way of the Lord. When we are refined, then not only are we ready to *receive* salvation from God, we are also able to *offer back* praise that pleases God.

So far, we've seen that preparing the way of the Lord is all about *repenting* and *refining*. As we look at Phil. 1:3-11, we see a snapshot of refinement at work, and how it results in pure praise. Paul opens by talking about prayer, in which he thanks God that the Philippians were willing to partner with him, even while he was a prisoner. Paul's imprisonment for Christ was refining him, and the Philippians wanted to participate and be refined too! Normal people don't associate with convicts, but the Philippians embraced this shame out of love for Jesus.

And so Paul responds with more prayer starting in vs. 9: he prays that they would be refined through even more of the love that entangled them with Paul the prisoner, bringing shame and suspicion on themselves in the world's eyes, but purifying them in God's eyes. God had given them special discernment and knowledge, so that where Rome found something to *reject* in Paul and his message, these Philippian Christians found something excellent to approve. And so Paul prays for more of that special grace for them! More of that, please!

And specifically, Paul wants them to abound in this discerning love so that they will be pure and blameless *for the day of Christ*. He wants their purity to prepare the way of the Lord! He wants them to be full of the fruit of the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, for this reason: to the glory and praise of God!

Isn't that exactly what Malachi was looking for? Isn't that exactly what the Messenger of the Covenant was coming to do? Jesus does for the Philippians what the Messenger of the Covenant was to do for God's people, and here's the result, which comes out as a bit of a tongue-twister, but it'll set your heart straight: The Philippians participated in Paul's purification, partaking of this grace to become pure personally. **Purified people praise God purely, and our pure praise prepares the way of the Lord.**

And with that in mind, let's consider Luke 1:68-79. This is Zechariah's joyful song of praise when God reveals to him that his baby son John is the messenger that Malachi prophesied so many years before. Zechariah's being refined and purified, too, you'll remember. When he hesitates to believe God's promise that he and his barren wife Elizabeth will have a son, God closed his mouth for months until the promised son is born.

But when he finally does open his mouth, we see that the purifying work of God accomplished its mission: Zechariah now speaks *pure praise*: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people.” And he speaks to his son John in vs. 76: “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins.

And what John prepares the people for is the coming of Jesus, when God visits His people in human flesh, to live and walk among them, bringing hope and light and blessing and salvation to the world! And the goal of all this preparation is found in the very last phrase of v. 79: God prepares us so that our feet are guided *into the way of peace*. The way of the Lord is the way of peace. When Jesus comes, God wants the result to be peace between God and man. He didn’t send Jesus into the world at the first Advent to *judge* the world; He sent Him first to *save* the world, in order to fill the world with Heaven’s peace.

Jesus *is* coming back in judgment, and all who prefer the darkness and the shadow of death will not endure the day of His coming, or stand when He appears. But God desires all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth, and so He has prepared a way of peace for us through Jesus Christ. And so for us today, preparing the way of the Lord means following the light of Christ into the way of peace, by repenting, by being refined, and by offering pure praise to God.

So let all who hear, prepare ye the way of the Lord.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*