PREPARATIONS TO MAKE

Malachi 3:1-5

Luke 3:1-6

December 5, 2021

 If Christmas is coming, you and I have preparations to make! Back in the days of the Babylonian Empire, when a monarch traveled through his dominion in his slow and ponderous chariot, a sort of corps of engineers were accustomed to go ahead of him and literally build the road the king had to travel. In a primitive sort of way these minions had to level the hillocks and build up the ditches and fill in the holes so that the royal chariot could make some sort of speed.

 All 4 Gospel writers picked up this image of on-the-spot road builders as they introduced the ministry of Jesus. John the Baptist becomes the forward guy out there preparing the way for the Lord. The command PREPARE means “push obstacles out of the way.” MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT means “no detours.”

 The imagery of the kings’ roadbuilder is from Isaiah 40: where the route is crooked, straighten it. Where there are potholes, fill them in. . . .

*Every valley shall be filled,*

 *and every mountain and hill shall*

*be brought low*

 *and the crooked shall be made straight*

 *and the rough ways shall be made smooth.*

And the result of all this straightening and leveling and banking and grading? The King will get through, and “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

 We’ve got some preparing to do, you and I. A lot can sidetrack us at this time of the year. Many folks miss the true Christmas because of distractions. John the Baptist comes on the scene engineering a straight path to the Kingdom of God. He lifts our sights to what our hearts really long for: God’s *coming*, a coming which cuts through the chaos of the world we live in, through the chaos of the lives we lead. So we’ve got some preparing to do. But that preparing is a great task, a holy task. At

its end is God’s cutting through the chaos, making straight for . . . us.

 I’ve said it’s a great task, and I mean not only holy, but large. What if you were given eight hours with an ax to chop down an enormous tree? If you’re like most people, you would probably grab your ax and swing furiously with all your might for eight hours straight . . . if you could. But Abraham Lincoln said something different.

He said, “If I had eight hours to chop down a tree, I’d spend six of the eight sharpening my ax”.

 A dull ax demands a lot of strength; a sharp ax saves strength. Lincoln, of course, wasn’t referring merely to axes and trees, however, but to preparations in life.

 Advent is our ax-sharpening time, a time to make straight and level up the highway of our God, a time to cut through the chaos so the Lord can make speed directly here.

 So how DO we sharpen the ax, hmm? I will admit to you that my tendency always is to want to tap the reservoir of joy, to fill up with things that satisfy the soul and sharpen the spiritual receptors. I like to get back in touch with scriptures that resonate with my spirit about *truth*, and *veracity,* and *conviction.* A special discipline of prayer is needed at all times but is especially welcome in high and holy seasons. Some families prepare by carving out a special time of family devotion, maybe around an Advent wreath at home, or maybe an Advent calendar, with the anticipation of opening one of those little story windows each day.

 But I feel like I prepare best in worship itself. Maybe I’m a little odd, or maybe that’s why I’m a minister . . . though one doesn’t necessarily rule out the other. I long and look forward to Advent services, and especially Christmas Eve services, special worship times in the year—times of Christmas programs and favorite stories retold, and lifting renditions of favorite carols. Worship—with bouncing, warm candles around the Advent wreath and windows and communion table casting a sepia glow that warms and softens the spirit. Worship—with forceful, Biblical words lifted up nd expounded in intriguing ways, ways that catch your heart. Are you with me?

Does worship catch you up too? I love it. What it does . . . for me, anyway . . . is it taps the reservoir of love and praise and feeling good about God.

 But folks, I hate to say it. Tapping into the spring of praise and warmth and worship doesn’t sharpen the ax very well. Believe me, I hate to say it. Because wanting to fill and expand and rejoice with those things is my first and strongest tendency, I assure you. So, what’s my plan.

Did you notice how John the Baptist and Malachi announced the coming of the Lord? John went around the whole region of the Jordan preaching and exhorting and threatening, for a baptism of repentance. John called the people to repentance, but he only baptized the ones who confessed their waywardness and gave indication that they were going to change their lives. When people would come to the river, John would excoriate them: “You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come?”

 And Malachi had told us, “Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me . . . . “Yes, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts, “But who will endure the ay of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire . . . . !”

 The coming of the Lord is not sepia-toned and warm and tender. We can’t prepare for it by tapping any reservoir of wonder. Preparing for the Lord means the foundational things, central things, have to be sharpened and ready.

 Judgment. Not warmth and peace and dancing, golden candles. Judgment. Woe is us. But why? This is Christmas, isn’t it? Yes, it is. Precisely that. he coming into our world of . . . the Christ. And the messengers want us to get the message straight.

 But I hear you again. “Christmas and judgment, preacher?” Yes. Judgment. I suspect you and I are too light weight in our Christian lives, and therefore look for the filling up with a golden, worshipful feeling. But when Christ comes, you, and I – we – have to put our lives once again under the judgment of one who saves us.

 But judgment. That’s such a brutal word, final and hard. And yet, judgment is a necessary part of the Gospel. You and I need to be caught up short, turned around, and changed.

 John the Baptist saw no inward contrition on account of their sins, no deep change, and so he withered them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from

the wrath to come? They are snakes hissing and hastening to escape when the grass which hides them is set afire.

 So here it is. Listen up. This is what I’m getting to. Judgment, friends, means that **[the life of a people, *at their foundation,* at the *center of who they are,* has to change to such an extent that they will be ready to receive God’s redemption.**

The Lord wants to make his arrival in you and me, but, folks, the way of the Lord has to be prepared along the way that HE wants to come in! What is crooked must be made straight. Where you and I have deviated from the clear and well beaten paths of God, we have to return to straight paths. The potholes have to be filled in. What is lacking in our character and our mercy and our justice, that has to be built UP. What is in the way – cares of the world, preoccupation, hardness of heart to the needy one, the one who is ragged or cold, the one who makes us uneasy—all this hardness of heart and this refusal to see and love is in the way. It needs to be broken down.

 These potholes of our character and the barriers to our love, our mercy, are exactly what Malachi and John were getting at. The judgment that prepares the way of God’s choosing is a judgment that puts its finger exactly on doing justice and loving mercy in our world. Malachi says it plainly:

 *I will draw near to you for judgment.*

 *I will be swift to bear witness against*

 *those who defraud the hired man of his wages*

 *against those who defraud widows and orphans*

 *those who turn aside the stranger*

 *and those who do not fear me,*

 *says the Lord of Hosts.*

 But it’s hard to hear, and it’s hard to do. In the 1930s, at the depth of the depression, a play called “Green Pastures” was setting a new record for consecutive performances. The play depicted God and the angel Gabriel in heaven, peering down at the earth. It was a delightful interpretation of God’s care and concern for a world in which he had allowed man the freedom of choice, and how he despaired over the terrible consequences of the choices which mankind continued to make.

God watched over his world and tried to prepare his children to meet its demands. After Moses and the Prophets, he sent his Son, who shared the sufferings and the heartaches of the people. Over and over Gabriel wanted to blow his trumpet and bring it all to an end. “Now, Lawd, can I blow the trumpet?” But always God held out in patience, knowing that something far better could come of it.

 “Everything nailed down is coming loose!” Gabriel exclaimed as he watched the chaos and confusion of the people on earth. Yet God wouldn’t give up, but kept preparing his people for his coming among them. The play ends with God talking about making common cause with his people, common cause with a people who had a hard time doing the kind of justice and mercy he looked for.

 And immediately a voice comes up from the earth: “Oh, look at him! O look, they’re going to make him carry it up that high hill! They’re going to *nail him* to it! Oh, that’s a terrible burden for one man to carry!”

 And God says, “Yes,” and all the angels sing, “Hallelujah, King Jesus.” Shaken, and brought around and grateful and changed, we, too, say, Amen.