

## Preparations

As we enter the month of December it is easy to see that almost everyone is involved in preparations—and the concept of getting prepared is the theme of both the Hebrew Scripture and the Gospel reading lifted up for this second Sunday of Advent—the season when we prepare for the coming of the Lord. However, the focus of much of the world’s preparations are through looking back into history—if they are even preparing to celebrate the Lord’s coming and not the retail event going around worrying about “supply chain issues”—Most of the preparations are done with a focus on the time when God entered our history over two thousand years ago. We enjoy the first singing of the good news of great joy done by the angels to some shepherds; we like to decorate with bright lights as we listen to the songs celebrating the event; and we also enjoy the giving and receiving of those presents placed under a tree. Yet the coming of the Lord about which these scriptures today speak to us is the one not yet here—the coming which is still to come--the coming of the risen and exalted Lord. So much time has passed since the first event, many no longer even think of this second coming or how it is something for which they need to prepare during this season. Even more to the point, the concept of this second coming bringing with it judgment about how they have lived and for which they must give an accounting is something most do not want to be associated with this joyous event they anticipate at the end of the month. As folks listen to the soaring lyrics of the Messiah, few recognize that they refer to the passage from Malachi which we just read; the passage that speaks of purification and judgment. But Christ’s second coming biblically speaking is based on these two events: purification and judgment. Advent is truly preparation not only for a remembrance of Christ’s first coming as a baby, but also for Christ’s second coming in power and glory. This coming will be the time God judges the evil in us and in the world according to our texts. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes this of the second them of Advent in a sermon he gave in 1928. “It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming, so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God.” Reading the descriptions of that event by the Hebrew prophets surely creates it as a day to tremble. Bonhoeffer continues...“we have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and God’s coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God’s coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience.” There is a warning note sounded in these descriptions of the second coming...Be careful what you wish for, in other words, because you may get more than you bargained for. The Hebrew prophets often described it as a day of terror. As Malachi said: “But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears?” For when he comes he will be coming as judge—judge of the evil in us and in the world. Only by understanding this can we then recognize the incomparable kindness within God’s mercy. God comes into the very midst of evil and death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. Malachi 3:2: continues “for he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. These were things that were used to cleanse and purify—the fire for precious metals, the fuller’s soap for valuable fabrics. The judgment to come will be to burn away the evil within us and remove the stains sin leaves behind. Refining gold and cleaning clothes are positive activities, but from the perspective of the gold and clothing, the process holds the prospect of much pain. So

within this process of judgment, God cleanses and sanctifies us, coming to us with grace and love. Sin clouds and distorts God's good creation, and we are helpless to clean ourselves from it so God has provided a way for us to be cleansed so that we may indeed stand before God's judgment. God comes into world for our good, for our well-being as Emmanuel. He comes as Jesus Christ and while the nativity scene we paint is usually informed by pastoral images of sweet baby Jesus surrounded by choirs of angels and placid sheep around the manger this entry of Christ does not mean that Christ's presence demands nothing of us or leaves us unchanged. Like a refiner's fire and the cleansing soap of Malachi's passage, the arrival of Christ in our midst calls us to reverent obedience and faithful praise. The good news of the first coming is that we will not be left unchanged but will be refined and reformed to become more like Christ. Much of what Malachi had to say was directed toward the priests of his time who had become lax, not requiring the people to pay proper respect to God's ways. According to the text they had gotten into the habit of bringing the worst they had as offering so they could keep the best for themselves and the priests accepted those offerings. To Malachi's way of thinking this meant the people were not treating God or his ways with respect—God and God's vision of how they were to be as a people was not looming very large in their daily calculations or actions. He desired to return God to the center of their lives, the covenant promises they made would again govern the society. God promises through Malachi that he will send a messenger to prepare the people for the coming judgment. Malachi's words are the last we hear in Hebrew Scriptures before we meet Jesus of Nazareth. There is a very long stretch of time between the events of Malachi's time and the coming of the infant we know as Emmanuel—God with us. Those long stretches of time are important in that they are full of the grace of God. The conclusion of Malachi's message and the beginning of John the Baptist's message is this: God is gracious and wants to shine down life on us. But sin is a serious problem and we cannot wish it or wave it away. God can't either. So Jesus Christ came to bring us back and teach us the ways of the kingdom. God's judgment is about refining us to remove whatever keeps us from being all that we were meant to be, and instilling in us qualities that shape us into the image of Christ. Our readings from Luke's narrative are focused on preparation. In the reading from the first chapter, Zechariah sings a psalm which is prophetic and about those his son who will be to serve as the "prophet of the Most High" as well as the role of Jesus as he recounts the promises God has made to raise up a "mighty savior." In the third chapter the adult John the Baptist come striding out of the Judean desert to prepare the way for the adult Jesus Christ. John's role was to go before the Lord to prepare his ways; to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins; to give light to those who sit in darkness; darkness and the shadow of death. The images here show that God is no distant God content to set the world in motion and then to leave it alone. The promise that is given to us again and again is the same. God is active among God's people, here and now. The song Zechariah sings is much like the song of our times—we see the faint light on the horizon, and we await the full dazzling light of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ. We find ourselves now in-between, standing in that moment of the already of Jesus' birth and the not-yet of his return. The light has dawned but doesn't seem yet to have reached the deepest darknesses inside and around us. Advent is an anticipatory time, and yet it is also frustrating and sometimes discouraging. That we can see the light, but also still are aware of the darkness and brokenness of the world in which we live. The dawning of the light must sustain us as we continue on, in both our waiting

and our living. It is interesting that although we have four gospel accounts about Jesus' life—two of them do not mention his birth that we celebrate this month. But all four gospels talk about John the Baptist and his fiery message of repentance; the gospel accounts may not mention Jesus' birth at all, but their writers recognized that no gospel would be complete without John the Baptist and his message—John was the necessary advance man to get the world ready to receive Jesus. What the world, and also sadly many who are disciples try to do too often is to celebrate the arrival of God's Son in our world without letting John the Baptist come first. None of us wants any Christmas guest to arrive at our homes before we've prepared for the visit by cleaning, baking and decorating for the occasion. Yet we seem quite willing at times to let Jesus visit us without first letting John the Baptist clean house for us as God sent him to do. John preaches that the first step on this journey toward receiving the "one for whom he is to prepare the way" is a baptism of repentance. John's hearers were probably familiar with two types of baptism: the baptism by which Gentile converts became Jews and so embarked on a new way of life; and the ritual washings that the Qumran community understood as cleansing them, but only if they turned from their sins and obeyed God. Both types of baptism called for changes in behavior. So does John's baptism of repentance because this repentance is not just regret for past misdeeds, it is not just being and saying "I'm sorry." Here repentance means a change of mind and heart, the kind of inner transformation that bears visible fruit. This baptism leads to release and forgiveness which follows does not undo past sins, but it does unbind people from them. It opens the way for a life lived in God's presence. It is light that reveals a new path, the way toward peace. Preparing for God's arrival means rethinking systems and structures that we see as normal but that God condemns as oppressive and crooked. It means letting God humble everything that is proud and self-satisfied in us, and letting God heal and lift up what is broken and beaten down. It is no accident that John lifts his message in the wilderness—it is precisely in wilderness places where God appears—for it is in wilderness places where uncertainty and vulnerability allow God's people to learn to depend upon God. The purpose of John's prophetic calling is not only to prepare the way of the Lord, but to prepare the people to receive the Lord through repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Luke quotes the passage from Isaiah which draws the image of radical transformation. Nothing along the way is the same, everything is changed. What is described is a world set right by being turned on its head—not by top down power that we humans often prize so highly, but by the upside down power of God—it is done with regularity that God chooses to work through unexpected people and ways. So as we make the Advent journey this year, let us be sure to include the messages of John the Baptist in our preparations as we get ready to remember God's coming to be with us so we also remember that Christ is Emmanuel now, and his presence with us can transform us to be prepared to meet him again when he comes in glory. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.