

MALACHI 3:1-4 (p. 779)

DECEMBER 5, 2021

LUKE 3:1-6 (p. 833)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Humbly, Lord, we ask you to lead us, as a Shepherd would lead Sheep who tend to wander. Guide us into your Truth Lord, and lead us into the people that you would have us become. Direct us into a State of Grace. Overwhelm us by your Presence. Empower us by your Holy Spirit. And do so, please, so that we might be effective messengers to your world. We ask this in the Name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“I WILL SEND MY MESSENGER”

Okay, I’m dating myself here! But I remember Johnny Carson hosting the “Tonight Show”! Do any of you remember that? He was the guy before Jay Leno, before Conan, before Jimmy Fallon! I also remember when Mr. Carson retired, after thirty years of being on the stage. One of the big News Anchors interviewed him, and asked Johnny to what he attributed his long run of amazing success. And Carson, without missing a beat said, “Every night I was lucky enough to be introduced by the great Ed McMahon”!

And there is some truth in that! A good introduction can go a long way in preparing folks for what they are about to experience. Particularly if it’s done right! A Headline Band, for instance, always has another group “warm-up the crowd” before stepping on stage! A big-time Comedian often has a lesser-known performer sort of start things off! And Politicians and Business Executives regularly have someone say a few words before they give a presentation!

There is just something powerful about a really good introduction, isn't there? You need the right person for the job, though. That's critical! And Ed McMahon certainly fit the bill. He was a real buttoned-down kind of guy. He smiled all the time. He was witty and articulate. He dressed well, and was quite funny. People were instantly drawn to Ed McMahon, right? He was like a happy grandfather. Even Publishers Clearing House could see his appeal! But imagine a half-crazed, frizzy-haired, shaggy-bearded, camel-coated, wild-man in sandals—standing in the middle of a stream, out in the wilderness, introducing people to the Son of God!

And John the Baptist was calling people to repent! Calling them back to God! That couldn't have been popular. He was doing it publicly too, and really quite vocally. John proclaimed the coming of the Messianic King, and did so with enthusiasm! In some ways, not unlike a First Century Ed McMahon! Instead of doing it from a couch though, or even from behind a fancy desk, John sat on a riverbank, on a great big rock maybe! And instead of using an illuminated, Los Angeles skyline as a backdrop, John had the entire Judean Wilderness rolled out before him!

And not to stretch the metaphor too far, but John the Baptist was the Introductory Speaker on the "Forever Show", not just the "Tonight Show". And his opening line was, "God is coming, so get ready! The Advent of the Lord is near! All of your Messianic expectations are about to be fulfilled! The very things the Prophets have spoken about for hundreds of years are about to unfold right before your eyes! So repent! And do it now!"

Imagine being there. “Wake up,” John says. “Our King is coming”. The One descended from David, the One Isaiah predicted. is about to enter the scene. Our Hope, our Redeemer, is standing right over there in the wings, right behind the curtain, ready to step out on stage! All of the promises, all of the plans, all of the predictions, all of the expectations are about to Go Live! This is happening even as we speak! So, you better drop to your knees before it’s too late! In the style of Ed McMahon, maybe, “Here’s Jesus!” The long-awaited King has come! Let me introduce Him to you! But if you think He’s come to bring comfort and joy, you might just want to think again!

I really like Luke. He witnesses to the Truth in a straight-forward way, just like he proposes in his opening remarks. He starts off his Gospel by saying, “I have decided to write an orderly account for you”. And he addresses his Gospel to “Theophilus”, which means “God Lover”. Luke, is giving us “Lovers of God”, the facts, the unadulterated facts!

And he locates everything in history, at a specific time, in the course of everyday life, in the midst of the real world. “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod Tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip Tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias Tetrarch of Abilene”. It all takes place in a specific, historical setting. Everything he says happens in a discernable, political, moment in time. And it all unfolds in a specific religious setting as well, “during the High Priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas”, it says.

The Word of God came to a specific location as well, in the wilderness, along the Jordan River. And to a specific man, John, the son of Zechariah. The Word of God burst forth onto a verifiable, geographic, historical, political, and religious stage, one easy to place in time! God sent His messenger right into the middle of everyday life!

John spoke Truth. He pointed to the Truth. Introduced the Truth! Or more accurately, John reintroduced Truth, and again, in a very specific way! His opening line was specific too. “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near”, the very same thing Jesus said when He began to preach! Notice that John didn’t say “Be better people”. And he didn’t say “Do more for those around you”. He didn’t even say “Make sure that you are in the Synagogue on the Sabbath”. None of those things are what makes you right with God. He said repent. Repent of your sins. Turn away from evil things, carnal things, things that are contrary to the will of God. Be baptized into the Name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of sin, each and every one of you. And do it now, before it’s too late.

Some earlier stage-setters—people who came before me, says John—like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel and Amos—Obadiah, Zephaniah, Zechariah and Malachi—all gave you a preview of this Great and Glorious “Day of the Lord”. You have heard them proclaim “The Coming Attractions”, since the 5th and 6th Century BC in fact. You saw the Pilot Episode for this whole series. You watched it unfold around you, got excited during the Commercials even. But now it’s time for the Show! And I want to introduce you to the Star.

And we are fine with all that, aren't we? I know I am. Or most of it. Or at least some of it. "Get ready" is okay. "Prepare your hearts" is even tolerable. The Advent of the Lord is at hand is great news! All that is good, and fine, and dandy, in fact! We're okay with all of the "warm and fuzzy" stuff in John's announcement. The Son of God is coming into your midst! Jesus holds the Keys to Eternity in His Hand, even! That's all good! But how do you feel, honestly, about all that "repentance" stuff? Are you okay with that, you know, "turning away from a sinful life", "being brought into account by Almighty God", "being responsible for the man or woman you are", or better yet, the "one you are called to be"? That is not a typical Christmas thought, is it? It should be. Clearly! But it is not what usually comes to mind when we think of the "Season of Comfort and Joy", is it!

I almost feel as if I need to insert a caveat here! Tell you I'm just a messenger, like Malachi or John! I don't pick the texts! They come from the Lectionary! I just try to preach them accurately and honestly! Believe me, I would way rather talk about "happy things" leading up to Christmas! And I'm sure you would way rather hear about "happy things" at Christmas! So, if I'm uncomfortable with "repentance" during Advent, and you're uncomfortable with "repentance" just prior to Jesus's arrival, can you imagine how John must have felt?

"Make straight paths for Him"! Don't wander around, or get distracted on your Journey of Faith. You don't want to be slowed down in any way. So, make your paths straight and true.

Clear out all of the obstacles in your way, all the junk and clutter. Get rid of the unnecessary debris. You don't want anything that might cause you to stumble on the way! "Fill-in the valleys" too. Smooth out any rough spots. Level-off the holes, and even the potholes that might stand between you and The Lord. Knock down the mountains, the big stumbling blocks. Clear away everything that obstructs your view. Plow under the hills, what you see as small things. Smooth out the molehills even. Knock down every mound, every clump of dirt, anything that might somehow trip you up. The King is coming! Get ready! In fact, He is already on His way! So, for Heaven's sake, prepare!

Just imagine the pressure of being the "Opening Act" for Jesus Christ. That would be a really tough job, wouldn't it? Now consider the truth, that you, actually are. That's your job! You are the "Opening Act" for Jesus' return performance! And you don't really have a choice either! We are all commanded in Matthew 28, the Great Commission, to "Go and make Disciples of all Nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to 'obey' everything that Jesus has commanded us".

That's our role as His followers. Our mission as the Church. That's your job as a Christian. You are here to warm-up the crowd. You are Malachi, "God's Messenger". That's what the name "Malachi" means in Hebrew, "My Messenger"! Scholars debate whether the Prophet Malachi was a single person, or if the text applies to the Proclamation of all Believers. Either way though, you're now the Opening Act.

I'll bet it was tough back then, don't you? People probably didn't want to hear what God's Prophets had to say. And in all Truth, it's still tough today, isn't it? But that doesn't let us off the hook. In fact, no one, ever, wants to hear that what they are doing, or how they are acting, is wrong—let alone, contrary to the will of God! No one, ever, wants to hear that they need of change! Look at Herod. He certainly didn't want to hear about repentance. That's why John lost his head!

I mean, who wants to hear that a radical transformation is called for, and immediately? Who wants to hear that the Advent of the Lord is an occasion that requires preparation? Who especially wants to hear that that preparation needs to include repentance, personal repentance, house cleaning if you will, actually turning away from your bad behavior? Not justifying it! Turning away from it! And yet, repentance is the central theme of the "Good News".

"Then suddenly," says the Prophet Malachi. It sounds like what we talked about last week, doesn't it? "Then suddenly, the Lord you are seeking will come; the messenger of the Covenant, whom you desire, will come." "But who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He appears? He will sit as a refiner of Silver, and purify His people! Imagine that. Have you ever watched the process of refining precious metal? If you've been in Church for any length of time, you've probably at least heard about it. Purifying precious metal requires putting it through an intense heating process, which literally burns-off all the impurities. That's the metaphor here.

Sometimes a catalyst, or solvent is added, something to help collect and solidify the impurities. The impurities then, the dross or slag, gathers at the top and is poured off and discarded, leaving only the pure metal. That's what makes it precious. All of the impurities have been removed. Think Holy. That example would have been quite clear to those in Malachi's day. Refining silver was a perfect illustration for the Prophet to use, on how The Lord purifies His people.

Silver, for instance, is held in the hottest part of the flame so that all of the impurities are burned away. If the slag, the bad stuff is not removed first, a hard outer-crust will form around it. A Silver Smith will sit there, holding that precious vessel in his hand, focusing his entire attention on it, the entire time it is in the flame, watching carefully. Too cold, and a lot of impurities remain. Too hot, and the precious metal will be destroyed. And the way that a Good Smith knows when the process is complete, I'm told, is when He can see his own image reflected in it. That's when He knows it's pure. The Lord is watching intently, the whole time that you are in the fire! The question is, can He, and the world, see His reflection in you?

I find it interesting how precious metals actually become softer the more they are refined. 18 karat gold, for instance, is softer than 14 karat gold. And 24 karat gold is softer yet! So, I guess that begs a question as well, doesn't it! Is your heart softening, the more you are refined? Or is your heart, due to the slag, actually hardening, forming an outer crust? Maybe the Silver Smith needs to turn up the heat?

Make Straight Paths in the Wilderness. Level out the rough spots. Be refined by the fire. Rest assured though that the Lord is holding you the entire time. Realize that His eyes are fixed upon you constantly. Know that He will keep watching until He sees His own image reflected in you. Start preparing though. Start preparing for the Day of the Lord. Because it is coming. So, repent, even now, before it's too late!

Imagine standing out there in the Wilderness, or downtown on the street corner, or in your place of business—at school, in a public place, surrounded by people with all kinds of different opinions. Now imagine proclaiming to them, that God is not pleased with the way that we have ordered our world, or even our Country, even our Churches.

You're just an ordinary person, mind you, like John, or Malachi, but someone who truly loves the Lord. Imagine telling those around you that the Advent of God is coming, and soon. To get ready! To prepare their hearts and their lives—to prepare the hearts and lives of their kids and grandkids! Imagine telling them to Repent, for the long-awaited Messiah is at hand!" Imagine introducing folks to Jesus Christ!

And there is a sense of urgency here, isn't there? Obviously! God is coming, coming to set things right, to redeem a lost and fallen world! The Advent of the Lord is at hand! The waiting is just about over! The time for action is now! Imagine how people would respond to that. Imagine how you would respond to that. I mean, after all, it is a personal introduction.

All four Gospels begin the story of Jesus, with the story of John. Apparently, the introduction is important. Apparently, you can't get to Jesus without going through John. And apparently, you can't come to salvation without first journeying through repentance! You can't get to Grace without first realizing your Guilt. And you can't arrive at Christmas until you pass through Advent, until you take the time to prepare.

There is a Voice calling in the Wilderness, even now! And that Voice is diametrically opposed to the busyness of life! Maybe that's why the Voice calls "in the Wilderness"? Maybe you can only hear that Voice when you are quiet and still?

People in Malachi's day were apathetic to "the things of God", too apathetic to hear that Voice of Truth. And those in the time of John were as well, too self-absorbed to even see the need to repent. Many still are today! So, our question, to ourselves, as we prepare, as we travel this Advent Journey, is actually; "Where am I, in the process of getting ready to meet my King?" And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

You are awesome Lord! You are there when we need you. Always faithful. And there, even when we don't think we do. You guide us and teach us Lord, and reach out to take our hand. You strengthening us for the road ahead. You correct us with patience Lord when we stray from the path. You send us messengers, signposts, prophets, to whisper a word. You even pour out your Holy Spirit, so that we will have your Presence within our hearts. You are truly an awesome God! Thank you, Lord, for drawing us to you, especially today. Thank you for calling us out of the busyness, and into this place of solitude, a place of rest in your loving arms. And thank you Lord for creating a place where we might lay our burdens down, a place of love. Father, we have shared with you our silent prayers, those deep stirrings of our hearts, and shared with you our private joys. And now, as your Church, as a Community of Faith who you have called together in the Name of your Son, we bring our corporate concerns before you as well.

Please be with this Church Lord, as we step out into the future that you have planned for us. Please guide your people here at Blaine, and those throughout the Church Universal. Cause us to hear your Voice Lord, and respond to your Call. Reconcile us, one to another, and especially to you. Bind us in love, through the love of your Son Jesus Christ. And hear us as we pray together in Faith. We lift up before you.....We place these precious loved ones into your abiding care Lord, in the Name of our Risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! And we do so, as we pray together now the very prayer that He has taught us, saying, Our Father...