

“The Church in Advent: Preparing”—Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

You better watch out,
You better not cry,
You better not pout,
I’m telling you why—
Somebody’s coming.
And that means we better get ready.

Please indulge me while I share another episode of my favorite television program, *M*A*S*H*. In this episode, entitled “Big Mac,” the 4077th gets word that, because of their stellar record of saving wounded soldiers, they will be visited by no less a personage than General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander. Now, the 4077th is rather lax in terms of military discipline and appearance—in fact, the place is a shambles, so they need, in the words of commanding officer Henry Blake, to “deshambilize.” So the unit gets busy cleaning and painting and sprucing up, and they go so far as to rehearse what they’ll say and do during General MacArthur’s visit. The irony of the situation comes when, at the end, General MacArthur and his entourage drive through the compound, salute, and go on their way. But someone important was coming—and the 4077th had gotten ready!

One of my favorite stories about getting ready for someone important comes from our days at Asbury Church in Appling County. Over the years, when the Parsonage Committee was coming, we’d clean up and straighten up and do all the things that would make that good impression that the parsonage family was clean and neat and not abusing the church’s house. We’d scrub and dust and wipe till our fingers were bony and our knees sore. But our favorite experience came when we were serving Asbury Church. The church had paid off the note on the parsonage, so we planned a note-burning service at the church and an Open House at the parsonage—and we were able to schedule Bishop Richard Looney for this event. When we went to the parsonage, Bishop Looney took a quick look around, said to Tammy, “I know what you preachers’ wives do—you stuff everything in the

closets and under the bed!” which gave us all a good laugh—and then Bishop Looney, who had been all over the old Statesboro District that day, sat down in my recliner and promptly went to sleep! But someone important was coming—so we had gotten ready!

So we have to prepare—after all, isn’t that what this Season of Advent is all about? So we have decorating and shopping and cleaning and cooking to do—after all, we’ve got the parents and the grandparents, the kids and the grandkids, the in-laws, the outlaws, the by-laws, and the scofflaws coming for Christmas. We’d better get ready! Here in the church, we’ve got the trees up and decorated and we’ve hung the greens, but we still have special programs and services to prepare and perform. We’d better get ready!

But if all we’re doing is getting ready for Christmas Day, we’re missing something. And if all we’re doing is getting ready for Baby Jesus, we’re missing something. Because that somebody who’s coming is indeed Jesus, but he didn’t stay in the manger. He grew up and took on the mission and ministry for which the Father had sent him—the mission and ministry of preaching the good news of the coming of God’s kingdom into human history; the mission and ministry of touching the least, the last, and the lost; the mission and ministry of offering himself for the sins of the world on the cross; the mission and ministry of defeating death forever by being raised from the dead; the mission and ministry of sitting at the right hand of the Father, from where he will come in all his heavenly glory and power to finish what he started, the work of the kingdom of God.

That somebody who’s coming is Jesus—but before he comes, he’s sending his messenger, one to proclaim his coming, one to prepare the way, one to call and lead God’s people in repentance and faith and obedience and service. In a much earlier day and time, as the Covenant People looked for the coming of God’s Anointed One, the Messiah, people believed that that messenger would be one of the prophets. Later on, people believed that Elijah would return and prepare the way of the Lord. And we as Christians believe that John the Baptizer was the messenger who first proclaimed the presence of the Messiah, Jesus, in the midst of the people. And who know but what the Father may send a messenger before the Son returns?

But I came here today to say that the messenger has come; the messenger is here; and the messenger will always be with us. For the messenger is not a human being—the messenger who comes ahead of the coming Jesus is the Holy Spirit.

And the Spirit comes to challenge us, to ask us the hard questions as individuals and as the Church of the Lord Jesus, preparing not just for Christmas but also for the Second Coming of the Lord.

So the Spirit is asking us: Are we drawing closer to God, growing more and more and more in our love for him as we seek the goal of loving him “habitually,”

as John Wesley said—in other words, loving him simply as a natural part of our being? Are we loving our neighbors as ourselves—that is, responding to the needs of those around us, just as the Samaritan responded to the needs of the man in the ditch, beaten by robbers and left for dead? Are we loving one another in the community of faith as Jesus loves us—that is, with self-sacrificing, self-giving love? Are we sharing the good news of God’s love in the community and the world? Are we making disciples—not just believers, but true followers of Jesus—through whom God will transform the community and the world? These are the questions with which the Spirit is challenging us, both as individuals and as the Church.

But if the Spirit is challenging us with hard questions, the Spirit is also leading us in finding the honest answers and in becoming the people who are ready to receive Jesus. You see, God doesn’t call us to become his people, distinctive and different from everyone else, without giving us the guidance and, most of all, the power that we need to be transformed. It’s only with God’s help through the power of the Holy Spirit that we turn ourselves back to God so that we might feel his forgiveness and his renewing power.

That forgiveness and transformation begins with repentance, which literally means “turning around”—turning our lives around from our selfish, self-centered ways, and turning back to God’s way. In a Sunday School class, the teacher asked the children, “What is repentance?” Little Johnny piped up quickly and said, “It’s being sorry for our sins!” But little Suzy said, “No—it’s being sorry enough for our sins to do something about them!”

And little Suzy was right. Repentance—our desire to turn away from our sin and to turn back toward God—should move us toward confession: we should be moved toward saying to God (and perhaps to others) what our sins are. Now, we might say that God already knows our sins—why do we need to tell him? Well, we need to tell him, not for his sake, but for ours—for when we confess our sins to God, we’re making ourselves aware of our sins and how dependent we are on God for forgiveness and transformation. As we confess our sins to God, we open ourselves to his forgiveness and transformation.

But forgiveness and transformation are real, if we’re willing to accept them. Forgiveness takes away the guilt we bear for our sins. Forgiveness tells us that we’re no longer held to account for our sins—for Jesus has taken on the penalty for them. There are two passages from the Old Testament that I have found really speak to me about the truth of forgiveness. One says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed from us all our iniquities.” The other says, “He has cast our sins into the sea of forgetfulness, and there he remembers them against us no more.” The truth we need to claim as God’s people is this: We are forgiven!

And with forgiveness comes transformation—a change within us through the work of the Holy Spirit. You see, if repentance is a turning away from sin, transformation is the movement of the Spirit within us that not only keeps us from moving back toward sin but also moves us more and more toward the life God calls us to live. This transformation—this work of the Spirit in our lives—moves us more and more toward loving God with all that we are and all that we have and loving our neighbors as ourselves. It moves us more and more toward Christian perfection in love—that habitual love of God and neighbor, the self-sacrificing, self-giving love for one another in the community of faith, the servant-mind of Christ that is the goal of our lives as Christians.

Of course, Advent is not the only time for repentance, confession, forgiveness, and transformation. Repentance is a constant in the life of the Christian. But as the Church in Advent, repentance and confession, forgiveness and transformation take on a special urgency, because we're preparing—we're getting ready to celebrate the birth of our King, and we're getting ready for the Christ who comes in final victory. As the Church in Advent, we are preparing, because Jesus is coming! Thanks be to God!