

## SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT | DECEMBER 5, 2021

MALACHI 3:1-4 | LUKE 1:68-79 | PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11 | LUKE 3:1-6

I was recently in line at the grocery store looking at the magazines when a publication I'd never seen before caught my eye: Prepper. Since it's sold in grocery stores, you might think that Prepper is a magazine for people who chop vegetables and make broth. It is not. Prepper claims to "[help] people be better prepared for emergencies large and small." And if the covers are any indication, the emphasis is usually on large.

The culture of prepping is easy to make fun of, it has more to do with performative masculinity than preparing for disasters—why check the batteries in your fire alarm when you could build a bunker?—but it's useful in that it makes explicit something we usually just assume. We prepare by acquiring, gathering, and stockpiling.

And even if we don't buy into the prepper lifestyle wholeheartedly, it's easy to take that assumption for granted. That we prepare for the future by gathering. Maybe we don't stock up on knives and Joe Rogan podcasts, but we have an extra supply of canned beans and toilet paper stashed away somewhere just in case. And we don't just gather physical resources but emotional ones, too. When we're going into a stressful situation, we load up on affirmation and compliments from others to shore up our feeling of self worth. We prepare by getting.

And so when John the Baptist tells us to *Prepare the way of the Lord* this Advent season, we might hear it as another invitation to gather resources, to load up schedules, to check off tasks. *When Jesus arrives, we're going to be up to ears in frankincense and myrrh.*

Which is why today's reading from Malachi is so important. Malachi tells us to prepare, but he does it in a radically different way. This book, which we don't hear from all that often, comes from the minor prophets. These are minor because their writings are relatively short, not because they're unimportant. It's from the post-exilic period, so it's trying to figure out how you put society back together after this traumatic experience. And one of the major traumas of the exile period is that the Temple, the dwelling place of God was destroyed. And so in today's reading, the prophet announces that God is about to dwell among the people again. And so the people, particularly the priests who are in the Temple, need to prepare for God's arrival.

There are two strange things about Malachi's call to prepare. First, Malachi says that preparations need to be made before God arrives. But people can't prepare by gathering resources. In fact, it's the exact opposite. Here's how Bob Alter's translation puts the key section. "And who can bear the day of His coming / and who can stand when he appears? / For He is like smelter's fire / and like the launderers' lye." Like

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the smelter's fire and like the launderers' lye. These are processes of removal. Fire removes ore to get metal. Lye removes stains to get garments clean. We prepare to encounter God not by acquiring more but by stripping away what's not life-giving and what's getting in the way of what's really important.

In the case of these priests, that likely means an inflated sense of worth built on social status. For you to meet God in the Temple, the prophet suggests, you'll need to drop the self-righteousness. You need to give up the idea that your vocation is here to serve your own desires, your own ego, your own interests.

And we might ask the same question for us. What do we need to remove or get rid of to encounter Christ dwelling among us? It might be resentment that serves mostly to make us feel superior. It might be our belief that we can find security and happiness through material wealth and property. It might be an indifference or inattention to creation. For others of us, including me, it might be our belief that the world's problems are always caused by other people. And that life would be on earth as it is in heaven if everyone were just more like me.

That's not as much fun as preparation by gathering. Imagine how well Prepper magazine would sell if it said the key to surviving disasters wasn't stocking up on chickpeas but going to therapy to learn how to apologize. Probably not as well. Preparing by removal, the smelter's fire and the launderer's lye, isn't always a pleasant experience. But Malachi reminds us that it's necessary. Because what prevents us from encountering Christ among us isn't a lack of resources but a belief that we have no capacity for growth and transformation beyond what we find comfortable or convenient.

Which is why Malachi's second reversal is so important. This preparation isn't something that you do on your own. It's something God does. In today's reading, the grammar is a little unclear whether it's God's messenger or God who does the preparing. But the point is that it's definitely not you. Who prepares us to encounter God? God does. If you are a priest trying to figure out how you're going to prepare to encounter God in the Temple, Malachi says that God will prepare you for that experience. This is sort of like how God prepares you to receive the sacraments. You don't prepare yourself.

You don't have to be a priest in the Temple to find this reassuring. Because our plans and preparations are usually good only up to a certain point. You think of every possible situation you'll have to encounter and prepare for, and then something comes totally out of the blue. If my ability to live out my vocation faithfully depends solely on my ability to have every possible contingency mapped out, I'm going to have problems. If it's all about my preparations then, to use the prophet's phrase, who can endure? And who can stand? Everyone feels prepared until they start living.

And so instead of stepping into the world with binders full of preparations that will get us ready to encounter God, Malachi suggests that we step into the world

trusting that God has equipped us with what we need to be faithful to our calling. God prepares us not by loading us up with plans and tasks, but by clearing away the brush that keeps us from being transformed and growing into the love of God.

This is a different kind of preparation than we're accustomed to. Not a task to fulfill. Not another event to schedule. Not another thing to acquire. But an invitation to transformation and renewal. In Christ, God meets us not simply at the end but along the way. Like the smelter's fire, like the launderer's lye, Christ shines through waste of our wraths and sorrows and reveals the heart of God.

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