

Advent 2 December 5 2021

Malachi 3:1-4; Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

Karen and I got back from our trip to North Carolina to see my family last Saturday. Before we went, we prepared for the trip; printing reservations, looking over maps, laying out a timeline, doing laundry and packing, making sure to stop the mail, get our neighbor Jim to watch the house. All to prepare for the trip.

When we returned, we prepared the house for Christmas. The tree went up, the wreath outside, lights on the back deck, decorations galore! And don't even get me started about what preparations are like when company is going to come over!

We all know what it means to prepare for something. Think about sports... one of our members is wrestling for the first time this year. She is being prepared to wrestle by her coaches through conditioning drills, repetition of moves for how to shoot a takedown, how to reverse, how to lock in a hold or break one.

We prepare for all kinds of things, exams, big events, new careers. These preparations are not meant to make us the best we can be, make us able to perform the task that will be at hand.

John, son of Elizabeth, who as we learned last Wednesday at our Advent Midweek worship was first to proclaim Jesus as Lord, is preparing the way for Jesus' ministry. Malachi talks also about the preparation of the people of Israel for the coming of the promised one.

My friends in Christ, we are the ones they are talking about. We are the ones being prepared. We are the descendants of Levi- gold and silver being refined through fire

that liquifies the metal so that the dross, the impurities can be removed. We are the crooked roads being made straight. We are the valleys being filled to completeness. The mountains and hills being humbled.

Now, there are those who would say that God is the author of our trials and tribulations. That God causes them. I would say it is an open question about whether God is the cause of these things, but it is clear in scripture that God can and does act through human events. It is also clear that, as Paul reminds us in Romans 8:28, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." Not that all things that happen are good, but that God will work ultimately for our good in and through our experience of those things.

We are the ones being prepared. Now, some of the descriptions of preparation, particularly in the text from Malachi might strike us as punishment, or a threat to our existence. Fire and fuller's soap can both burn! But it struck me this week, the refiner's fire is not about destroying the gold or silver. Rather, it is about making it more what it is. More fully silver, more fully gold, removing those impurities that make it less what it should be.

The preparations for wrestling are not meant to destroy the body, but to prepare it for what is to come. To make it strong, fast, more effective to wrestle. Our preparations for company at the house do not destroy the house but make it the best and most welcoming home it can be.

Now, as anyone who has done physical therapy or played an instrument or sport knows, preparation is not without pain or discomfort. It pushes us into places we have not gone and forces us to live there awhile.

But what happens over time? With much practice and effort, with time lived in those places? The fingering becomes easier. We are less tired after practice. The move comes without thinking. Over time, we come to a place of comfort in that new skill, new talent, new physical state. We become the athlete or musician.

When I looked at the lessons for this season of Advent, I wound up with a central question for each week. Last week, it was *Who are we waiting for?* This week it was *Are we ready for this?* Because ready or not, Jesus is coming and we are being prepared.

Some of the preparation we have talked about is chosen. Playing a sport or instrument, going on a trip, having visitors. We choose that preparation. Some preparation is thrust upon us. The death of a loved one. The loss of a job. A pandemic.

Going into 2020, we had a lot of energy and momentum here at St. John, then the pandemic hit. Suddenly, the way we always knew church to be, changed. Our certainty about the way life always was, changed.

Almost two years later, things are still different from what they were. The pandemic has accelerated trends that already existed in both society and the church. Some good, some bad, but all real.

If we believe with Paul that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purposes, then these past two years raises some questions. How are we being prepared in this time and place for the work of being the church? How has this pandemic been a refiner's fire for us? What are the things that it has burned off as dross? What is the purer essence of who we are that is left?

Is this time of pandemic preparing us for things to not be the same? Up to February/March of 2020 life as a follower of Jesus was pretty easy. Assembly around the Word of God read, sung, proclaimed, received, and the sacraments- these means of God's grace to come to us- of baptism and communion. Then, suddenly it required some effort, some intentionality. Things that we had seen as so essential to church were gone. Fellowship, Sunday school, bells, quilting.

What was this time preparing us for? Was it reminding us of what the essence of what being church is? One thing everyone has commented on was how much they missed being together in person. Has it taught us that incarnation, en-fleshment, being physically present with one another is somehow essential to what it means to be church? Has the fact that incarnational presence has been the means of transmission of this virus also taught us to be more attentive to how our actions affect our neighbors? To be more other centered, think of the consequences of our speech and actions for more than just me and my family. Has it taught us that we are all dependent in one way or another on each other?

What is this time preparing us for? How is it refining us to be more who we are called to be, who we are, the body of Christ visible in the world. An outpost of the reign of God. An expression of God's love for the outcast, the poor, the hungry, the naked, the oppressed and rejected. An outpost of healing for the grieving, the broken, the imperfect.

Ironically, I think it has reminded us that we are church together, but also that we have a calling to be disciples of Christ in our own home and our own lives. With Sunday School not being able to meet, parents have been reminded of the fact that they are the primary faith givers for their children. Not me, not the church. We are here to support

and supplement, but we cannot take the place of a parent. Raising their children in the way they should go. We have all been reminded that the task of being a disciple requires time and attention. It requires practice. If we say we follow Jesus, we ought to spend time on what he has to say in Scripture. We should practice and study the basics of our faith with the same diligence we practice scales or run basic ball handling drills. So that come game time, we are comfortable with those skills.

What is this time preparing us for as a church? We, like other churches across denominations, are going through a refining fire. Challenges to find enough volunteers to staff ministries we used to have, challenges to receive enough resources to continue to fund the ministries we have. So, what does this challenge, this preparation, lead us to? Remember, these things are not out to destroy us, but to make us more fully who we are called to be.

Is this time of pandemic preparing us to be a more focused church? One that will not do faith for us but call us into the walk of discipleship. Equip us for our own individual ministries as parents, grandparents, as bosses, and students, children, and siblings. Is this time of pandemic calling us to be more generous with our giving not to support things for us, but to give to those who have so little?

These are questions I would invite us to ponder this second Sunday of Advent and beyond.

The point of preparation is not perfection. Even the greatest athletes, musicians and technicians never stop preparing for their craft. It is also not salvation, both Malachi and John are clear about that. The preparation is to meet the one who will save us. Jesus. Jesus born on Christmas morn, hung on the cross on Good Friday, and who walked out of the tomb on Easter, breaking the hold of death over all those whom he

loves. Jesus is our hope and our salvation, not the work that we do. Jesus is the one who enters our darkness with a light so bright and beautiful nothing can overcome it. Jesus is, as John puts it, the salvation of God.

Are we ready for this, my friends in Christ? Are we willing to trust in the claim God has already made on us in baptism? Are we willing to ponder what we are being prepared for in this time of refining fire? Are we willing to imagine a new and different future? Not for our sake, but for the sake of the world. So that others might be prepared to meet the author of our own salvation. The one who frees the captive and raises up the lowly. Jesus, son of Mary, who is the promised Christ.

Are we ready for this?