

## **Worship Resources - Change Is Coming**

**Advent 2, Year C,**

5<sup>th</sup> December, 2021

**Malachi 3:1-4 NIV / Luke 1:68-79 NRSV / Luke 3:1-6 NRSV**

**Prelude**

**Welcome/Announcements**

**Pass the Peace**

**Call to Worship**

One: We come to prepare the way;

**All: The way for Christ –**

One: the hope of Christ, the peace of Christ –

**All: to enter our world, to enter our hearts.**

One: We cry out together in the wilderness:

**All: The kingdom of heaven has come near.**

One: We come to be part of the light–

**All: the light that shines in the darkness.**

**Invocation**

Holy God, We long for your peace, and trust in your promise; we hear your call to turn toward you, to change our lives and welcome you in. Meet us here and fill our minds with your wisdom and our hearts with your peace, that our worship together may open us to the challenge of your dream of wholeness for all. In the Name of the One who is coming, we pray. **Amen!**

**Opening Music      Hark! The Glad Sound      184**

**Prophetic Reading: Malachi 3:1-4 NIV**

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty.

But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap.

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness,

and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

## **Lighting the Advent Candle**

Bill and Sylvia Hershberger

**Bill:** As we continue our Advent journey, we take a moment to reflect on how we prepare for the arrival of the Christ child among us.

**Sylvia:** John the Baptist came to prepare the world for the change Jesus came to make change: change in the world, but just as importantly, change in each one of us.

**Bill:** As we light this second candle of Advent, let us find hope and peace in our own mission, to prepare our world for the change Christ ushers in and the kin-dom of heaven that draws near.

### ***(Pastor lights candle)***

**Sylvia:** And like this candle, may we be beacons of peace in a world that still seeks conflict and violence.

## ***Hanging of the Greens***

As we prepare to celebrate the faith we find in the Christmas, we continue to decorate our worship space in anticipation. Let's share in fellowship together as we assemble and hang the trumpet banners this week. I've put one together as an example and we can work together using the items on the back pew. I hope we can continue our fellowship together after the service with some light refreshment as well. After we have the windows decorated, we'll continue our service by coming together for our morning prayer time.

## **Hymn            *Comfort, Comfort, O My People*    174**

### **Zechariah's Song    Luke 1:68-79 NRSV**

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty savior<sup>[a]</sup> for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant,  
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us <sup>74</sup> that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear,  
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.  
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.  
By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon<sup>[b]</sup> us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

## **A Time of Prayer**

### **Joys and Concerns**

#### **Pastoral Prayer**

God of timeless grace, you fill us with joyful expectation. Make us ready for the message that prepares the way, that with uprightness of heart and holy joy we may eagerly await the kingdom of your Son, Jesus Christ, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever.

God of hope, you raised up John the baptizer as a herald who calls us to conversion. As we joyfully await the glorious coming of Christ, we pray to you for the needs of the church and the world.

*Prayers of the People, concluding with:*

Hear our humble prayers that we may serve you in holiness and faith and give voice to your presence among us until the day of the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

Out of the embrace of mercy and righteousness, you have brought forth joy and dignity for your people, O Holy One of Israel. Remember now your ancient promise: make straight the paths that lead to you, and smooth the rough ways, that in our day we might bring forth your compassion for all humanity. Amen.

## **Gospel Reading     Luke 3:1-6 NRSV**

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler<sup>[a]</sup> of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler<sup>[b]</sup> of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler<sup>[c]</sup> of Abilene,

during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,

as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

### **Message – Change Is Coming**

So, are you ready for Christmas yet? Christmas is an occasion that probably requires more preparation by many of us than just about any other. There's writing and mailing the Christmas cards, decorating the house, often inside and out, baking cookies, buying presents, planning meals and grocery shopping, and for many the biggest job, really cleaning the house. And while travel restrictions and quarantine have given us a little reprieve last year, it can be an overwhelming job that just never seems to end, there always seems to be more to do. Some people get very organized about it and plan it all out, others, folks like me, wait until the week before to even get started. That just means I'm very deep in Advent reflection, of course, no reflection on my procrastination or organizational skills. Regardless of how we approach it, Christmas is a change in our routine that most of us need to prepare for in some fashion.

But why do we jump through all these hoops every year? For many of us, the answer would be to have that perfect Christmas: the one where the house is decorated just so, where the meal comes out perfectly and everybody loves their cards and gifts and has the best time

gathered together. The one with no last minute crisis or eleventh hour trip to the grocery store for more eggs. We do our best to prepare so there are no pages left unturned.

Turning to the pages of our scriptures this morning, they too have a lot to do with preparing for Christmas. From Malachi to John the Baptist, there's a sense of anticipation, of getting ready for something big to come, of getting prepared. But what were they preparing for? Well judging from what they recorded in our readings this morning, something pretty big. Something that would solve all their problems, something that would refine them and straighten all their paths.

In our modern age, we've lost some of the sense of the difficulty of travel in times when roads were built around the terrain instead of through it. When roads went around or over mountains instead of through tunnels under them. But for those readers in ancient Judea, they would understand how the significance of that imagery, as I do, since many of the old roads in Palestine still wind their dusty way around and over the landscape. These were a people who had become accustomed to hardship, to walking the long, difficult road. Yet they never seemed to find relief from that difficulty.

Malachi was written to the community who had returned after years in exile to find life wasn't turning out like they thought it would. They weren't going back to a land of promise, flowing with milk and honey. They were still subjects of foreign oppressors. Many struggled to make ends meet while others colluded with the enemy and benefited from their oppression. God was not doing what they expected. There was no divine vengeance on their enemies or divine benevolence providing ample prosperity. In their minds they were ready and prepared for the day of the Lord, that apocalyptic final time when God would intervene and make all things right. Likewise, those in John's time still yearned for that redemption. They anxiously sought the messiah, that glorious Davidic ruler foretold in Isaiah and Daniel who would come to redeem them and put them back on top.

The problem was, the change they were preparing for, that they yearned and long for, was not the change God had in mind. The Almighty had sent them prophet after prophet telling them how to prepare, how to make ready for the day of the Lord. Yet over and over again they turned a deaf ear to those teachings. The new society they created when they came back to Judea was just as unjust as the one that was destroyed by the Babylonians a few generations earlier. And in the four centuries or so between their return and the time of Jesus and John the Baptist, the corruption only spread deeper, infecting even the Levites and Priests. These were the men who were supposed to be the embodiment of proper living, yet profited from injustice just as much. What they failed to perceive was that the redemption of the day of the Lord was within, not without. God sought an inner cleansing within the individual, reflected in the larger cleansing of the sins of society. Their ritual sacrifices weren't cutting it anymore. There needed to be inward change, not just empty acts of contrition.

Malachi illustrates this in the imagery of purifying metal. The flame burns away the impurities and increases the concentration of what is valuable and pure. John the Baptist in his ministry in the desert, followed in the footsteps of the prophets before him. In fact, in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, they consider him to be the last of the First Testament prophets. He called out the people for their sin, for their disregard for the welfare of others. He offered baptism as a way for people to acknowledge their sin and seek redemption, ritually cleansing them of their transgressions in order to commit to starting anew.

Yet neither Malachi nor John could forgive their sins. They too were called to preparation. But their mission was to prepare others for the change that was to come in Christ. A change to shift the focus from yearning for the promises and covenants of long ago to seeking their fulfillment in the Gospel that was to come. A life altering change that would completely reorient what it meant to find salvation and what was important in one's life. A change that required preparation. This change was accomplished with God's grace sought through one's own acts of redemption, seeking forgiveness, and making real change. Change that required the divine refiner's spiritual fire.

There's a story of a group of women that met for Bible study. While studying in the book of Malachi, chapter three, they came across verse three which says: "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." This verse puzzled the women and they wondered how this statement applied to the character and nature of God. The following week, one of the women called up a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him while at work. As she watched the silversmith work, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire, where the flames were the hottest as to burn away all the impurities. The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot, then she thought again about the verse, that "He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver." She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the entire time the silver was being refined. The man answered yes, that not only did he have to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on it the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left even a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, "But how do you know when the silver is fully refined?" He smiled at her and answered, "Oh, that's easy - when I see my image in it." When you refine metal, not only are the impurities burned away, but they are replaced with carbon, which helps the metal resist oxidation, keeping it from tarnishing, keeping it shiny.

That story is a good illustration of the twofold preparation God calls us to. First and foremost, we are called through the Spirit to refine ourselves, seeking to rid ourselves of impurity so that we emerge pure in heart and spirit. But just as importantly, we too are called to be as that refined silver, reflective of the Divine within each of us. Our shine should

demonstrate to others how to prepare for the change to come. Because there is change coming.

In Advent, we prepare not only for the change to come in the arrival of the Christ child, but we also prepare for the kin-dom of God that he draws near and that breaks into this world. We are called, like John, to prepare others for the change to come. So are you really ready for Christmas? Is your personal to-do list complete? Or is there more that needs added? Changes to perspective, changes in behavior, changes in reflection. If we are not shining like pure silver, reflecting the image of our maker, then more work is needed, isn't it?

There are a lot of parallels between the times of Malachi and John, and our own. It is an unjust world in which we live as well. Many among us struggle like in ancient times, many suffer under the yolk of oppression, here and abroad. Are we following the warnings of the prophets and being beacons for justice and compassion? Or have we allowed our shine to fade, to tarnish? We need to be prepared for Christmas. Because, as Malachi tells us, the day of the Lord is coming. Will you be ready? Ready to shine? I pray we all reflect the divine spark within each of us.. Amen.

## **A Call to Serve**

### **A Time for Reflection**

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who have lived in the shadow of death the light has shined. With the prophet's words, let us joyfully participate in sharing the life-giving work of God in our world today through the giving of our tithes and offerings.

As we listen to the following selection by Annie, let's reflect on what needs refined in our own lives, that we may be the divine reflection for others to prepare for the change to come.

### **The Prayer of Thanksgiving**

With these gifts, dear God, accept the praise and thanksgiving of our hearts, which rejoice in your goodness and love. Let our gifts point to your presence in the world, and further your dream for the world through Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us.  
Amen

**HYMN      How Firm a Foundation      567**

## **Commissioning/Benediction**

God calls out to us from the wilderness of our lives, from the places that are tangled and full of shadows. God calls out to us and leads us in the way of peace. Listen to God call your name, and know that you are loved. Listen to God's voice, and know that you are forgiven. Listen to God's proclamation, and know there is new life, restored life, now. Go and live into the Good News. Amen.

## **Postlude**