

*The Joy of Preparation*  
Malachi 3:1-4  
Luke 3:1-6  
December 6, 2009  
Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

## **I. Introduction**

Pregnancy is an amazing time, as a new life begins to take shape inside the womb of a mother. When my wife Jeannine was pregnant, I entered a whole new world. I loved watching Julia move on the sonograms, and eventually to feel her move underneath my hand. The whole experience was wondrous and terrifying and completely consuming. Pregnancy is a wonderful counter balance to a society that is profoundly goal-oriented; because you can't rush a pregnancy. In general it's going to take nine months – give or take – regardless of what you do; so you might as well enjoy it. And it is an incredibly rich and joy-filled time as you prepare for this miracle that will completely change your life.

Advent – which, of course, was the end of Mary's pregnancy – is set aside in the tradition of our church as a time of preparation as well. It's a time when we prepare our hearts again for the coming of the Christ child – another miracle that completely changes our lives. The liturgical color that we use to decorate the church and in our stoles is purple, just like in Lent. Advent is *not itself* a time of celebration, but a time when we *prepare* ourselves for celebration.

You wouldn't necessarily know that looking at the fact that the day after Thanksgiving, the Christmas decorations are up at CVS. We substitute the word "Holiday Season" for Advent, in part to be inclusive of those who are not Christian, but in part because we as Christians are also in Holiday mode already. We're celebrating before the celebration actually begins. The result is that this time that we are supposed to use preparing for the celebration gets missed entirely. And the related result is that the actual celebration can't be experienced fully.

## **II. Preparation**

When you are expecting a new baby, there's lots that you do to get ready. You assemble as much of the equipment as you can; you start obsessing over which car seat to get, and weigh the pros and cons of breast feeding vs. the bottle; and if it's your first child and you're a member of Metropolitan, you read compulsively all the books you can on parenthood [Did you notice that by the time the second child came along – even though you didn't remember a single thing they said – that you never cracked those books open?

You've got to feel sorry for second children!]. And it's exciting. It's fun to prepare for the coming of a child. The air is thick with anticipation, and the work to prepare is full of meaning.

The Scripture passages from the lectionary for this morning both talk about this process of preparation for the coming of Christ. Now we all spend a lot of time preparing for Christmas. We're buying ridiculous numbers of presents; we're decorating trees and hanging Christmas lights; we're preparing for parties (or preparing to attend parties). Cards to write. Cookies to bake. There's a lot of work that goes into getting ready for Christmas.

But both of our passages this morning highlight the fact that *our real preparation* for Christmas doesn't have to do with all the things that we do on the "outside." It really has to do with the work that we do on the *inside*. And ironically, all the *outside* work often impedes the *inside* work.

### **A. Repentance**

Our Luke passage is about John the Baptist. John, you'll remember, was Jesus' cousin. He came from the priestly tribe of Levi and from a respectable family. But John leaves all that in answer to a call from God to go out in the wilderness as a prophet. There was a Jewish religious sect who also lived out in the desert called the Essenes. They were a very strict community who held everything in common and were awaiting the final judgment of God. Some scholars believe that John may have spent some time in this community (some even think that Jesus may have spent some time there). John had one very simple message for his listeners, and it is the same message that he has for us: repent. For John, the process of preparing for the coming of God's kingdom involved turning away from the things in our lives that separate us from God and one another.

Advent – like Lent – is a time of repentance for Christians. It is the time that we recommit to putting away patterns of destructive behavior. What are those habits in your life that you know have been making you less than God intends? This is the time of year to address those. When mothers become pregnant, they bring lots of focus to trying to live in more healthy ways. They watch what they eat and take vitamins. They help prepare their body for the child growing inside them (fathers often do the same by osmosis!). Likewise, Advent should be the time when we put away those habits that are destructive to ourselves and to each other.

This makes Advent the ideal time to reconcile with someone with whom we have had a break in relationship. Maybe someone at work, with whom there has been tension. Maybe a family member from whom you have been estranged. This is your opportunity to approach them in the joy of the season, and apologize for your part in the conflict and try to set things right. For John the Baptist, this process of repentance and reconciliation is the primary way that we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ.

## B. Purification

Now John's own preparation for his ministry was a process of stepping away from the normal life of his family, stripping away the paraphernalia of the everyday, and living a life of primitive simplicity in the desert. His dress, his food, his speech: everything about him is simple and unadorned. The second way of preparing for the coming of Christ is this process of simplification, of purification.

This idea of purification is a central one in our passage from Malachi today. Malachi is a prophet who lived in the late fifth century B.C.E.; after the exiles had returned from Babylon. His name – Malachi – literally means, in Hebrew, “my messenger”; and since his primary theme is to prepare people for the coming reign of God, some scholars assume that “Malachi” may have been more of a title than an actual name.

The words that we heard from Malachi, in our passage this morning, are familiar to most of us because we have heard them in Handel's *Messiah*. They speak about the messenger that God will send to prepare the way for his coming. Christians have always understood that messenger to be John the Baptist.

Malachi uses a number of images to help us understand this process. He refers to God's coming as a refiner's fire, which is obviously a reference to the fact that metals are refined in a hot fire that burns away their impurities and leaves the metal unalloyed. He also refers to God's work as a “fuller's soap.” Fullers were the people who took freshly woven wool clothe and cleaned and thickened it to make the fabric more consistent and more attractive. As part of that process, they used an alkali soap to bleach the fabric white.

Both of these images call us to shed the things in our lives that clutter them. Purification involves shedding the extraneous stuff and getting back to a clear simplicity about who we are and what we need. This is a particularly challenging call in a time when our normal American consumerism kicks into hyper-drive. Christmas is indeed about celebration, but celebration is about making a day special; and if every day is feasting and celebrating, then really no day feels celebratory, because it's no different.

Pastor and author Marjorie Thompson, in her wonderful book Soul Feast wonders: "Have we lost the art of true feasting through rejection of the fast?" In other words, in a culture that lives most of its life in excess, how can we express celebration? She suggests that if we really want to experience celebration, we need to cut back during our time of preparation. Now, we've all got Christmas parties to go to this month, but maybe what that means is that at those other times during the week, we cut back on our consumption. Maybe we have a vegetarian meal, or we actually fast a meal.

Maybe we take a little of our time to slow down and breathe a little deeper. Pregnant mothers tend to slow down naturally. And the society around them supports that process: we give a hand and encourage less exertion. What would it look like if we did that preparing for the coming of the Christ child?

The message of Malachi, and our own Wesleyan tradition, is that as far as our spiritual lives are concerned, *less really is more*. Our spiritual preparation for Christmas has got to involve beginning to let go of the material possessions that imprison us. But I do want to ask you to think about where it is that you can cut back this month. Cut back on purchases, cut back on food, cut back on extravagances. Think about bringing a new focus and simplicity to this season of preparation; and see if it doesn't make Christmas more joyful.

### **III. Conclusion**

Luke closes today's passage by quoting that beautiful passage from Isaiah that we also know so well from Handel's *Messiah*: "and all flesh together shall see the salvation of our God." Luke wants us to understand that the purpose of God's coming is to redeem all of creation, not just the chosen people.

I worry that when non-Christians look at the way we celebrate Christmas, they don't see much to emulate. But what would it mean if, when non-believers looked at us this Christmas, they saw people seeking to reconcile with each other? What if they saw people simplifying their own lives so that they had more to share with their needy neighbors? That would be a witness that would change some hearts, and show people what it really means to be in love with Christ.

Being a new parent means falling hopelessly in love with this small helpless creature that is now part of your life forever. And that is a wondrous, amazing gift. But the process of preparing for that gift shapes how we can receive it. Our preparation for the coming of our child impacts how we celebrate its presence with us. So it is with the coming of the Christ child. Let's let our preparations reflect how we truly seek to receive him.

Amen.