

The Second Sunday in Advent
December 9, 2012
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

Malachi 3:1-4

“See, 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.

The season of Advent is a time of preparation, and do you ever think “*what a pain?*” You have to put up the lights and get up the tree. You have to battle and I do mean battle the crowds at the stores to pick up all the gifts on what seems to be a constantly growing Christmas list. If you have family coming you have to get the house ready or if you are going away you need to get things ready to go. Yes, all the cooking, cleaning, decorating, shopping, and all around craziness can make all these preparations kind of painful.

Yet, how sweet are those moments God allows us to enjoy that make all those painful preparations worth it! When you are sitting in your chair and you look at your family who has gathered to spend this time with you and realize you now have another memory to last a lifetime. When you see the eyes light up and the joy in the faces of your children or grandchildren as they open the gift they really wanted. When you get some time to relax and take pleasure in some of the Christmas cooking and decorations and think about what Christmas really means. At those times we recognize why all the preparations were made, however painful they might have been.

Advent is a season of preparations. This morning we are going to talk about preparations far more important than decorating our houses and buying our loved ones gifts. We are going to talk about spiritual preparations. We are going to talk about sinful and hard hearts which are in need of being prepared. These preparations are also necessary. They need to be done for us to be ready for Christmas, for Christ, and for His coming again. These preparations are not always pleasant. At times they really hurt. But I pray in the end we also enjoy the awesome blessings God intends to bring through them and that we understand why these preparations were made however painful they might have been. Today, consider how Advent season is for our good as the Holy Spirit works in our hearts making: **Painful Preparations.**

Think of some of the graphic pictures of preparation we are given during Advent. We have a picture of John the Baptist coming in and cleaning house. There is the picture of making crooked paths straight, filling in the valleys, and making rough places smooth as if getting roads ready for a king. We hear about the ax already at the foot of the trees about to cut down all those with no fruit. We hear again and again the message to repent. Repentance is a difficult, even an impossible thing for us to do on our own. We want to excuse sin or cover up sin. We want to pretend our sin is not that bad or as bad as others

and that God will tolerate it. The last thing we want to do is feel sad about it or confess it or turn away from it because our hearts are hard. Now we see why the graphic pictures – they are pictures of what needs to take place in our hearts. Now perhaps we understand why God sends prophets like Malachi and John the Baptist with His powerful Word. Our hearts are in need of painful preparations.

Malachi had a message of law for God's people. The people of Israel at this time withheld their tithes doubting God would take care of their needs, and they questioned God's justice when they saw the wicked prosper. Even the Levites and other spiritual leaders started to have an indifferent attitude. Instead, of seeing their own sins and confessing them to God they blamed God and complained to Him. Malachi tells the people in the verses before this: ***“You have wearied the Lord with your words.”*** Remember these were people God had delivered from captivity and brought back to Judah. He had restored the temple for them so they could worship the Lord in it once again. But now they had been back for 100 years and they were getting impatient. They were waiting and wondering if the Messiah God had promised will ever come.

Not only does Malachi say that He will, but God will even send one to prepare the way for His coming. While Malachi did His own preaching and preparing among the people there God will send another prophet. ***“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.”*** This is a clear reference, as the New Testament confirms, to John the Baptist who would come about 400 years after Malachi the last Old Testament prophet. How did John the Baptist and how does the message of John the Baptist prepare hearts for the coming of Christ? He points out sin. He preaches the law. He clearly tells us we can't depend on who we are or what we have done because none of those things are able to save us from the coming wrath. He cries out: repent. He tells us to turn away from our sins whatever they may be and turn to the One who is coming. He tells us to produce fruits in keeping with repentance.

I was talking to our neighbor some time ago and was surprised to hear that she had switched churches. She went on to tell me she likes this new church because they do not feel the need to talk about sin. She said she always feels good there. But I am here to tell you that God does not always what you to feel good. Let me repeat that again: God does not always want us to feel good – nit when it comes to our sins! That is why the Lord sent Nathan to point out to David that He was “the man” – the man who deserved to die for his sins of adultery and murder. Jesus did not want the rich man who trusted and loved his riches more than God to feel good and that is why the man left sad after Jesus told him to give it all up and follow him. It did not make Peter feel very good when Jesus asked three times just as Peter had denied Jesus three times: *“Do you really love me?”* The law is not meant to make us feel good. It crushes us. It condemns us. It shows us our sins and cuts off all avenues of escape. It makes painful, sometimes very painful preparations.

But the Lord sends Malachi, John the Baptist, and others with His law because He wants our hearts prepared for another message. He wants to cause us pain to drive us back to His peace. He wants us to hurt so that we may be healed. He wants to turn us away from sin so we run back into His arms filled with grace. He shows us our sin before he shows us our Savior. This is the Savior to whom Malachi now points us. ***“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.*** Aren't those words

just absolutely beautiful? The One you have longed for, for many years, the Messiah, the fulfillment of God's covenant, the Savior you desire, will come. Oh, how those words must have been a comfort for those wondering if it will ever happen! We have seen it – in that most unlikely place, in the most unlikely way, Jesus came for you and me.

Malachi's prophecy, as many Old Testament prophecies do, sees into the future and mixes together both comings – Jesus' first and second coming into one full picture. ***“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.”*** On our own none of us could endure the Day Jesus comes to Judge the world. No sinner can stand before Jesus when He appears. Because of Jesus' first coming will we be able to stand when Jesus comes again. For like a refiner's fire, ***“the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1)***. Like a launderer's soap, we like David turn to Jesus and say: ***“Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow” (Psalm 51)***. Our grieving hearts are turned to Jesus who a contrite and broken heart will not despise. When we are crushed and condemned by the law, the gospel points our eyes to the cross where Jesus was condemned in our place and to the empty tomb where the only things that were crushed are sin, death, and the devil. The reason God uses the law to make us sad is so He might use the gospel to make us eternally glad.

Jesus keeps refining us, cleaning us, using His law and gospel to change our hearts of stone into heart that believe and love Him. ***“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.”*** As the Lord keeps working on us, preparing our hearts for Christmas, for Christ, and for His coming again, it is sometimes painful. Like the dross and impurities that need to be burned from precious metals, so God keeps working on our hearts and lives to drive away all sin and things that are not pleasing to Him. So when the law is preached I pray we listen. Listen because it is the Word of God. I pray we listen even when it doesn't make us feel good. Listen because the Lord wants to prepare your heart for something greater.

A little girl was jarred awake suddenly one night by loud crashes of thunder and lightning. She cried out for her father, who came into her room several times to comfort her, only to hear her call again as the thunder drew ever closer. ***“Don't you know that God is with you?”*** he asked her. ***“Yes, Daddy, I know God is with me,”*** the little girl replied. ***“But I'd rather have someone with skin on.”*** Malachi and John the Baptist announce to us the coming of Immanuel, God with us, who puts skin on to be with us and to save us. As painful as spiritual preparations may be, in the end when we look into the manger and see God's gift to us there we see it is more than well worth it. For to us a Child is born and a Son is given. The desire of the nations has come. Christ took on human flesh and blood to live and die, and not alone for me. So keep making your preparations for Christmas even though they may indeed sometimes seem like a pain, and keep praying the Lord does the same in our hearts, for God wants to bless and keep you through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.