

120912 Advent 2c

“Iron and Fire” Rev. Seth D Jones ©

Malachi 3, Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6

We are terrible, I mean all of us, at receiving the love of God. We spoke of this last week as we looked at the Promise of God. We need to hear the story told every week to know what we are committing to. Advent is particularly difficult because we have heard the story over and over again as well. What is the new Word God is trying to speak to us today? How is this new for those of us who have heard the story of the coming of God in the flesh into the world every year for years and years? How do we Prepare for the coming of the Lord? This week of Advent we look at Preparing the way of the Lord.

Let's begin with what seems to be a simple question: What are we preparing for during Advent? When John the Baptist says, quoting Isaiah, *“Prepare the way for the Lord”* what are we to do? What does it mean to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ? How do we prepare for the receiving of the Holy Spirit? How do we make straight the way of the Lord? The question begins to be not so simple anymore. How do we prepare for God's presence?

Malachi asks this question in this way: *“Who can endure the day of the Lord's coming? Who can keep standing when he appears?”* (Mal 3:2). Who, indeed?

Sometimes I feel like I am repeating myself up here is because, often, I am trying to help you understand the profound and completely reorganizing nature of God through Jesus Christ. Maybe I am wrong, but I think we all get used to our faith. We get used to the rituals and routines. We get used to our talking about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We get used to the culture and institutions that define 'church', 'faith', 'belief' and 'being' for us. We get used to doctrines and creeds and self-promotion of our way. But, if we are really reading the story correctly, we will see this is precisely the environment into which Jesus comes when we celebrate his birth in a couple of weeks. Jesus is a direct challenge to what the people of God have gotten used to. How do we prepare for that? How do I prepare for that?

In Malachi, we see that it is not us who prepares the way of the Lord – it is the Lord who prepares the way for the Lord. It is the Lord who sends a messenger to clear the way, not us. It is the Lord who comes to the temple, not us. It is the Lord who purifies and refines, not us. How, indeed, do we prepare for this?

How do we prepare for what Luke 3 presents to us? We see a God who uses history itself to alter and change history through a man of the wilderness ushering in the arrival of a carpenter from Nazareth, born of a young woman of with nothing to offer her world, raised by an earthly father who has no standing. How do you and I do what John the Baptist asks of us, by way of Isaiah? *“Make his paths straight. Fill the valleys. Bring low the hills and mountains”* - how do we do this? Luke seems to suggest the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins is how this happens. But again, it is not us. It is God who has set this in motion. God straightens the paths. God fills the valleys and brings low the hills and mountains. He makes the crooked straight and the rough ways smooth.

I still have not answered our question, though. I have only told you what we don't do. What we do, how we prepare, if we even can, is reflected in our baptism. In baptism, we **allow** ourselves to commit to the ways of God. In baptism, we **bow down, submit**, to the work of the Holy Spirit within us. And in baptism, we **trust** God and Jesus with our eternal lives. In allowing, submitting and trusting, we actually become like Jesus in his life, death and resurrection.

This then is the answer to how we prepare for the coming of the Lord: *we prepare by becoming like the one for whom we are waiting by allowing God, submitting to God and trusting God.* In becoming like Christ, we become more truly ourselves, more completely human. The reality is we

cannot in any way prepare for the coming of the Lord, either in history or in our personal lives. (I just agreed with Anne Hutchinson in saying this, who was sent to Rhode Island by our Puritan forerunners). As those who have chosen the way of Jesus Christ, however, we are now looking for the coming of the Lord in this world and in history. We are the ones who seek to be witnesses to Christ and therefore to the Kingdom of God.

First, we **allow** God to make us like Christ. In Acts 1, we read of the choosing of Matthias by the disciples in order to replace the space left by Judas. Peter says to the disciples, *“Thus one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time the Lord Jesus associated with us, beginning from his baptism by John until the day he was taken up from us – one of these must become a witness of resurrection with us”* (Acts 1:21-2). We prepare for the coming of the Lord by becoming a 'witness of resurrection' with others who have also been chosen to be witnesses. We allow our eyes to be opened by the Holy Spirit to witness acts of resurrection all around us and in this way we become like the one for whom we are waiting. We become formed by resurrection, by Christ's rising from the dead, by our own rebirth and rising from the ashes of our brokenness and sin. Can we allow ourselves to be formed by Christ's death and resurrection?

Paul says in Romans, *“For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we will certainly also be united in the likeness of his resurrection”* (Rom 6:5).

Second, we **submit and bow down** to God just as Jesus submits to the will of God - *“thy kingdom come, thy will be done”*. So we submit to the refinement and purification God intends for us so we might become holy people in his eyes and for his world, a *“proper offering”*. Malachi 3 says God will *“act like a refiner and purifier of gold and silver”, “a refiner's fire, like a launderer's soap”* (Mal 3:2b-3).

Imagine with me for a moment that the events in your life, difficult and truly happy, but particularly the difficult ones, are designed by God to purify and refine us in order that we might become more like the one for whom we are waiting, more like Christ. I do not mean to say God has caused bad things to happen, but I do mean we are witnesses in such a way that those difficult things refine us and purify us, that God uses those difficult events to refine us. Such a view requires a bowing down to what God is calling us to do, a submitting to God's will, a will which is always beyond our understanding and ability to know. What we can know, however, is that our experience, once it is given over to God, is now in God's hands. And in God's hands, in his constant shaping of us to become more like Christ, we are like clay, being formed, fired and forged into gold and silver, white and pure for presentation in God's holy temple.

In the early church, the human soul was spoken of as iron forged in the fires of the Holy Spirit. We become like Christ in the same sense that a red hot iron is like fire. It glows with inner light, but it is not the light – the light is given to the iron. The iron is hot like fire and can create new fires, but it is not fire – the heat is given to it. The iron becomes pliable and able to take on the shape the blacksmith intends for it, just as our being is forged and formed by the will of God. It is in this sense that we bow down, submit, to the forming of God so we might become like the one for whom we wait.

Third, we **trust in God** that God will make in us a light which shines like the light of Christ, that God will bring about a new heaven and a new earth not just for us but for all peoples in all places, that God will transform us and our world in such a way that Christ's love will shine forth and pour out upon all of creation.

We have gathered together as this church to wait and watch for God. In many ways, this is an act of trust among ourselves and with God. We trust one another to fulfill the covenant we make with one another as Rockland Congregational Church, but more importantly we trust God will be present with us. We trust God will complete his good work in us.

Paul says in Philippians 1, *“For I am sure of this very thing, that the one who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. For it is right for me to think this about all of you, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and*

*confirmation of the gospel all of you became partners in God's grace together with me*" (Phil 1:6-7). That is quite a trusting thing to say about another. (Repeat Paul)

Can you say what Paul just said about the person sitting next to you? Do you trust in God to complete the good work not only in you but in the person next to you?

Psalm 25 tells us a little bit what trusting in God means. It says, "*My God, I trust in you...*" Trusting in God begins in prayer. Just as we allow and bow down before God, we give over to God all things. Then the Psalmist says, "*Make me understand your ways, O Lord. Teach me your paths.*" Understanding and learning mean we take the time to discover and learn what God's ways are like. Remember, we prepare for God by becoming like the one for whom we await. We therefore take the time to understand and learn about Jesus. Who was he? What did he do? What was he like in his behavior, his thinking, his relationships? How did he face difficulties in his life and in the life of others? "*Guide me into your truth and teach me. For you are the God who delivers me; on you I rely all day long.*" Do we really trust God? Do we really believe God will do as God said? Do we believe we will be formed into one who looks like the one who is to come?

John the Baptist, a hermit, a prophet, a crazy guy wearing camel's hair, eating honey and locusts comes out of the wilderness. On a platform of history defined by rulers of empires, guardians of earthly kingdoms, magistrates of cities and towns, religious authorities and demagogues, this man filled with the Holy Spirit preaches baptism and preparation. He quotes the prophets of old and his words resonate with other prophets filled with the Spirit of God. What do we do? How do we prepare for what we cannot prepare for?

We can only prepare by *becoming like the one for whom we await*. We can only prepare for Christ by becoming witnesses to Christ in the world and thereby being formed by what we see, hear and experience in the shadow of Christ's resurrection. We can only prepare for the coming of Christ by doing as Christ did – by **allowing God** to show us a resurrection way of living, in ourselves and in others; by **submitting**, just as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane, to God's refining, cleansing and purifying will, so that, like Christ, we can stand holy before God in the coming of his Kingdom; and by **trusting** completely in God's work within us and within his creation.

Our preparation for any work of God, any appearance and presence of Christ, any work of the Holy Spirit can only be acknowledged and perceived by promises already made by God alone. And our preparation must be built on the promise of God's coming Kingdom in Christ. We do so by **allowing, submitting to and trusting in God** that God will do these things, with confidence and hope.

As Paul says to the Thessalonians, "*Now may the God of peace himself make you completely holy and may your spirit and soul and body be kept entirely blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is trustworthy, and he will in fact do this*" (1 Thess 5:23-24). Amen.