

Getting Ready

Bible Reading:
Malachi 3: 1-4
Philippians 1: 3-11
Luke 3: 1-6

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It is recorded that from time to time Martin Luther wrestled with dark periods of spiritual listlessness, and despair. During one particularly dreary time, when it was hard for him to summon the desire to preach, and daily faith living had no appeal, his wife came downstairs dressed all in black.

"Who died?" asked Martin?

"God." replied his wife.

"He did **not**" shot back Martin.

"Well... you're sure living like he did." said she.

The Devil was having a yard sale, and all of his tools were marked with different prices. They were a fiendish lot. There was hatred, jealousy, deceit, lying, pride--all at expensive prices. But over to the side of the yard on display was a tool more obviously worn than any of the other tools. It was also the most costly. The tool was labeled, DISCOURAGEMENT.

When questioned, the Devil said, "It's more useful to me than any other tool. When I can't bring down my victims with any of the rest of these tools, I use discouragement, because so few people realize that it belongs to me."

[John Yates, "An Attitude of Gratitude," Preaching Today, Tape No. 110]

The devil must have used that tool a fair bit on ol' Martin Luther.

He certainly used it on the Old Testament people of Israel in Prophet Malachi's day. When we catch up with them in chapter 3, I'm not sure that they cared any more. Rumor has it that they had all but given up. They had grown disillusioned, spiritually discouraged.

This book was written about 430B.C. when a remnant of Jews had returned to the city of Jerusalem from exile in what is today Iraq. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah the piles of charred timbers and smashed stonework had been cleared, the city rebuilt, and a new temple erected.

Ah, but it didn't seem to have the same beauty as the city and temple of their great-grandparents.

And decade after decade had passed without a hint or a whisper of any divine presence or activity in this city and building dedicated to Him.

Nothing.

It all appeared so grey and so very, very empty.

Politically, too - hardly a triumphant life among God's people. Israel remained just a tiny, back-water province in the empire of Persia.

And so, as the years dragged into decades, the spiritual vitality began to sag like some middle-aged waist-line. Worship degenerated into a listless perpetuation of mere forms. Observance of God's law was no longer taken seriously.

Malachi, whose name means "*my messenger*" comes with the word from God -

Wake up.

Stand up.

Clean up.

God is not dead.

God has not forgotten.

God **IS** coming.

Get ready.

And the prophet paints a picture common in the ancient world. In those pre-Internet days – can you believe there *were* such days? – the coming of royalty to a city was announced by a messenger well in advance. And the wise city was the one who paid attention, and took advantage of the warning to clean things up, engage in some civic works projects and made the place clean and ready for the honored guests.

Not much different than still happens today in many countries, where the arrival of dignitaries is preceded by a huge cleaning and repair of the city. We saw it recently when the Governor General went to Moscow. We see this most blatantly in Olympic host cities - huge public works projects to display the city's best wares to a world that comes as a sort of mass royalty through TV networks.

Fix things up.

Clean things good.

Get ready.

Important company is coming.

Which is Malachi's message to a spiritually sleepy and devotionally stained people of God. In fact, it's the very last message of the Old Testament.

AND

The first prophetic message of the New Testament.

John, son of Zechariah, comes into the desert picking up where Malachi left off.

Prepare the way of the Lord.

Straighten out the crooked bits.

Fill in the potholes.

Get rid of the frost heavage.

Smooth out the rough, cracked spots.

Because

God is coming!

John was preaching in anticipation of the coming to earth of the Son of God.

He was preparing the way for the One whose birth we are soon to celebrate in the festival of Christmas; the coming of Jesus.

God's coming to earth.

People, get ready!

Not by cleaning the city.

But doing a house cleaning of the soul.

We're getting ready to celebrate that miracle birth - that's what the church season of Advent is all about.

Getting ready.

But not only for the first coming of Jesus.

Also for His second coming.

And that's what St. Paul points towards in Philippians 1.

He stands, as it were, on the shoulders of John the Baptist and Malachi to shout

"People get ready. Jesus is coming!"

He encourages his readers so that - v.10 - "*in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness....*"

"The day of Christ" means the day when Jesus is going to return to earth as Judge and King of all.

The very last day of human history.

OR

The associated biblical meaning - the day when we leave this life through death, and are carried to stand before the judgement throne of God.

I'm not sure which will come first in my life -
 If I'll die first
 or
 If Jesus will come back first.

Either way – I've **got** to be ready.
 And to be ready, I've **got** to keep alert and keep working on my spiritual life and growth and health.

Some years ago, Athens was awarded the 2004 summer Olympic games. Everyone was excited. Except a few, who wondered at the attitude of some on the host organizing committee. *"They're not passionate enough; too complacent."*

And now, with months to go, Athens is **really** behind the eight ball, and may not make it in time for the Olympics. Which may be terribly embarrassing, and could prove rather costly.

I watch that news come out of Greece and think -

*"I **DON'T** want to be caught short like that when Jesus returns!"*

From time to time sports pages report about an athlete who is demoted from training camp to the farm team, all because they were lazy in the off season and reported to camp out of shape. Their reflexes are poor, muscles out of tone, mind not focused, and heart not really in the game.

"Play hard or go home" says the soccer poster.

Sometimes these guys are **sent** home.

I **don't** want to be sent packing when Jesus returns.

Will I be ready?
 Do I have what it takes to go, and keep going?
 To hang in there for the spiritual long haul?

That's not an easy question to answer in our contemporary culture.

Life is fast, and keeps getting faster.

Not having internet is enough. It has to be **hi speed**.

One minute commercials are seen as boring and dragged out. Thirty second commercials are fast being replaced by 10 or 15 second blips.

Cell phones and Blackberry's are everywhere for instant access.

Banking is instant.

And TV still gives us the ol' "solve the world in 30 minutes or less" fairy tale.

How conducive do you think that all this is to developed a disciplined, focused long-term approach to godly, Christ-centred living?

Eugene Peterson suggests that we have lost our sense of spiritual life as a pilgrimage and have replaced it with a "tourist" mindset. In other words it involves a visit to an attractive site which we make when we have a bit of leisure time. That may be a weekly jaunt to church, or occasional visits to special rallies or renewal events. We hear the new personality, the new tune, the new experience and enjoy it.....

for the moment.....

till the next "wow!" comes along.

[Long Obedience p.12]

North America's passion, says Peterson, is for the immediate and the casual.

We want short cuts, instant credit, quick results.

We want the high points.

Friedrich Nietzsche has been quoted as saying:

The essential thing "in heaven and earth" is... that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.

[Long Obedience p.10]

For an atheist, Nietzsche got at least this part right!

Aligning the direction of our lives and our purpose with the direction and purpose of heaven.
And then hanging in there for the long haul.

Not terribly glamorous.

Not a quick fix.

But it's the stuff of real life - eternal life.

Along that journey there are two biblical words to describe people of faith.

The first is *disciple* - We've been working on that concept in our evening services, where we've come to see discipleship as living an apprenticeship for Jesus; being in a Master-Pupil relationship with Christ - growing, learning, always in the skills of faith living and holy action.

The second word is *pilgrim* - that's a word reminding us that we're on the move, we're headed some place, towards a real destination. The way we travel is the way of Jesus, who is Himself ***The Way, The Truth and The Life.***

Brothers and sisters in faith -

The coming Christmas season presents to us in grand and beautiful ways the truth of God's overwhelming and amazing goodness -
the grace and peace that He pours into our lives through Jesus Christ;
the grace and peace with which Paul can bless the Philippian believers at the beginning of the letter.

God's great goodness gives us hope. It gives us direction.

We're not alone.

We're given peace.

With that gift of goodness comes a challenge to us.

To shape our lives to fit with that goodness, to follow it.

And that shaping work is an on-going project.

A long-term one.

It's a project that God is busy with – shaping us to look and talk and think and behave like Jesus.

A little more every day.

It's a project that Paul lives with confidence, and commends in the Philippians with confidence -

V. 6.....

"being confident of this, that the One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ Jesus."

God is at work among His people.

He is forming a holy, Christ-shaped community.

And He is going to see that project through to completion!

It is the good work for which Paul prays in vv.9-11:

- An increase of love

- A deepening of experiencing God's truth deep inside

- And a firmer grip on the Lord's will for the world and for their lives.

Philippians reminds us that God is at work shaping a community of faithful believers.

He is at work.

And He'll see it through to the end.

The question is this -

Are we prepared to join in that project?

Are we prepared to see it through to the end in our own personal lives?

Are we prepared to engage in the long-term, deep, ongoing, intentional project of submitting to Jesus and opening our existence to the Holy Spirit's influence?

Even when it isn't quick?

Even when it means making hard choices?

That is the question God places before us on this second Sunday of Advent.

When I return,

When I come for you,

Will you be ready?

In the dark days of World War II, 1941, while Britain was under threat of invasion and enduring terrible bombardment by the Luftwaffe, Prime Minister Winston Churchill went back to a boy's school where he had studied, and almost flunked out. He gave a short speech that since has become very famous. In it he said:

But for everyone, surely, what we have gone through in this period.... this is the lesson:

never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never-in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.

We stood all alone a year ago, and to many countries it seemed that our account was closed, we were finished....

Very different is the mood today. Britain, other nations thought, had drawn a sponge across her slate.

But instead our country stood in the gap. There was no flinching and no thought of giving in; and by what seemed almost a miracle... we now find ourselves in a position where... we have only to persevere to conquer.

[<http://www.winstonchurchill.org/never.htm>]

And they did.

Because they never, never, never,

never-in nothing,

great or small, large or petty

- never gave in

How different from the general mindset of North American society.

Which has become very morally, ethically soft.

Spiritually flabby.

Ready to quit on God at a moment's notice.

Oh - many people will give a try at the latest and greatest spiritual fad.

But to stick with it, a long obedience in the same direction?

Pilgrims rather than tourists?

Disciples and pilgrims determined to make good for God?

There's the challenge for us, friends.

A challenge that, as we take it up, makes us a tiny minority in our nation.

But let me tell you - a **blessed** minority.

A minority, in this season of Advent, this season of celebrating Jesus' first coming, and looking forward to his second coming -

that can look forward to that time with eagerness

that can look forward to a smile on the Saviour's face

and the beautiful words from his lips -

well, done, good and faithful servant!

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins writes:

The coaching staff of a high school cross-country running team got together for dinner after winning its second state championship in two years. The program had been transformed in the previous five years from good (top 20 in the state) to great (consistent contenders for the state championship on both the boys' and girls' teams).

"I don't get it," said one of the coaches. "Why are we so successful? We don't work any harder than other teams. And what we do is just so simple. Why does it work?"

He was referring to their simple strategy: We run best at the end. We run best at the end of workouts. We run best at the end of races. And we run best at the end of the season, when it counts the most. Everything is geared to this simple idea, and the coaching staff knows how to create this effect better than any other team in the state.

That's so different from many runners, who head off with a bang, front of the pack, but then flame out and drop to the back of the field by the end of the race.

I wonder how people will view my life when it comes to a close?

I wonder how God views it?

As one who starts with a bang and trumpet fanfare, but slows down half way through, and maybe even quits?

Or as one who runs the best at the end?

Today Malachi and John the Baptist are our coaches.

St. Paul is on the sidelines, cheering us on.

And Christ Jesus is in heaven - watching, encouraging, and ready to send us all the help we need..... if we will but ask.

Help to run.

Help to endure.

Help not just to stagger over the finish line of life -
but to run the best at the end.