

Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.^[a] ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Matthew 24:36-44

"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son,^[a] but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day^[b] your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

"Advent: Songs of the Faithful"

Malachi 3:1-4 & Matthew 24:36-44

Rev. Leanne B. Thompson

First Presbyterian Church of Willmar, MN

December 2, 2018

If you had a chance to share a meal with a person whom you admire – living or dead – who would like to meet for lunch? Who would you like to sit with in a quiet place, so that you could talk about life, the universe, and everything? Maybe there is a grandparent you never met, or beloved relative whose wise counsel you are missing. I can think of some pretty amazing people who have

inspired me, and I would love to have the opportunity to learn more from them. People like Fred Rogers, Desmond Tutu, and Maya Angelou. So, now you have someone in mind. Think of that person for a moment. That person you would like to meet. Now, imagine you are going to be having lunch with that person, in about a month, at your house. You have a menu to prepare, floors to vacuum, furniture to dust. Because, of course, you want everything to be perfect when you meet this hero of yours...in your home. Because, obviously, the first thing Mr. Rogers is going to do is check to see if I've wiped down the baseboards (no). Even if its not rationale, we want everything to be perfect. But this is really exciting, and you have time to prepare. And for the next 4 weeks you get to experience the joy of anticipating of that person's arrival.

Now, imagine if I told you that while we were sitting here, that hero of yours arrived at your home and went in to make themselves comfortable and wait for you until you get home from church. They are there. Now. Ready or not. Did your joyful anticipation just turn to anxiety? Mine would. Its one thing to know someone special is coming when you have time to prepare. Its another thing altogether to imagine that person arriving unannounced to find my counter heaped with dishes, piles of clean laundry waiting to be put away, and dog hair on everything. And the bathroom...did I leave dirty clothes on the floor this morning? I think I would just die of embarrassment if Maya Angelou saw my dirty underwear and socks on the bathroom floor.

Friends, here is the reality of Advent: someone special is coming. The Messiah, the Savior of the World, is about to make an appearance, and we are getting ready. We do this every year. We begin this countdown to Emmanuel's birth. We make all kinds of preparations to welcome the Christ child. We clean. We decorate. We bake. We buy. We wrap. We volunteer. We host. We celebrate. We sing along to Christmas carols on the radio. When our family arrives, right on schedule, the meals are planned and prepped, the guest rooms are ready to receive, and the stockings are hung by chimney with care. When they come, we are ready because we knew they were coming. And we have all of the dust bunnies and dirty laundry safely banished from sight. We greet our family and friends – and we greet baby Jesus – with joyful anticipation.

And anxiety. I suspect there is just as much anxiety as joyful anticipation this time of year. We are anxious because we want everything to be perfect, and we know – in our heart of hearts – that perfection isn't *actually* attainable. We are anxious because dust bunnies multiply faster than we can chase them away, and so do our doubts and fears. We are anxious because dirty socks might stay in the laundry basket, but skeletons don't like to stay in the closet. We are anxious because we love our families, but we have complicated histories to navigate with them. We are anxious because we know we will feel the absence of loved ones most acutely when their place at the table is empty.

Here is the other reality of advent: sometimes all the sparkle of Christmas preparation looks great on the surface, and we can prepare our homes to their shiny best, but our hearts are still broken. Our world is still broken, and there aren't enough colored lights in the world to fix everything.

We need a Savior.

So, during this Advent season we rehearse the story again. We go through the motions of welcoming the Savior who has already come as a rehearsal for welcoming the Savior who is yet to come. Time gets all mixed up during Advent. Past, present, and future are layered over each other as we find ourselves, in this moment, preparing to welcome the one who has already come and celebrating the arrival of the one who isn't here yet.

Jesus has already come, and Jesus is coming again. On Christmas Eve we will lay the baby Jesus in the manger and welcome him to our world, we know he is coming and we know when. But what we are anticipating, hoping for, longing for, when we do that, is for Jesus to come back and finish what he started. We are anticipating, hoping for, longing for, Jesus to make us whole, to heal the brokenness in our world, and to fulfill the promise that there will be no more suffering and no more tears. We live in joyful anticipation that Jesus will return.

And we live in anxiety. The problem is, we don't know when Jesus will return. We don't know the hour or the day. He could just show up when we aren't ready. Now, I'm confident Jesus won't care if the house is clean, and food isn't


really a problem because he can make a feast out of whatever we happen to have lying around. But Jesus sees into our hearts. And on any given day, I'm not sure what he will see there.

That is the tension we read about in today's gospel lesson. We want Jesus. We need Jesus. But we might not be ready for Jesus. We might not feel worthy to welcome Jesus. Jesus might arrive to discover that our hearts don't have room for him because they are three sizes too small --- like the grinch. Jesus might walk into the room when we are at our worst, not our best.

That's why we need advent. Its why we need this time intentionally set aside to practice welcoming the Savior. We need this time of preparation so our hearts are ready to receive him when he returns. Don't mishear me - I didn't say we needed this time to perfect ourselves for his return. I said it was so we would be ready to receive him when he returns.

Thanks to authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, who penned a book series that was popular in the late 90's/early 2000's I spent more than a few sleepless nights during my young adult years worrying that in the last days I would be left behind because I wasn't worthy, wasn't righteous, wasn't perfect. I am here to tell you, they missed the point. Jesus isn't coming for the ones who have declared themselves perfect. Jesus is coming for the ones who know they are broken and in need of Jesus' saving love. Jesus isn't coming to give us a high-five because we've purified ourselves. Jesus is coming so that he can be the refining fire in our hearts and lives. Jesus is coming to the faithful who have found a way to sing songs of joyful anticipation in the midst of anxiety and fear.

Friends, our best preparation for the arrival of Jesus is not to try and make everything perfect, or to hide the things that cause us shame and embarrassment. Our best preparation is to open our hearts, even if it means revealing our imperfections, so that Jesus can make us beautiful. What does that mean for this season of Advent? It means even when we are anxious and fearful, we sing the songs of the faithful: we sing "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" and set us free instead of trying to disguise our shackles with glitter. It means singing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" and rescue us while we do our



best to offer compassion, care and rescue to others. It means we sing, “While We are Waiting, Come” even if our homes, and hearts, and lives, are messy. It means we sing hope, love, and joy into the darkness of the world. And we spend time with the people we love, and the people who inspire us, whenever the precious moment presents itself.

People of God. Jesus is coming. And the same things we are practicing during Advent – acts of kindness and generosity, quality time with loved ones, gratitude for all we have received, patience and peacemaking – these are the same things that shape our whole lives, any time of the year, to be ready for the return of our Savior. May you spend time this advent season practicing keeping your heart authentic, open, and welcoming for all times. And singing the songs of the faithful to sustain and inspire you in the days of waiting.

Alleluia! Amen.