

Malachi 3:1-4, Canticle 4, Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6

“See I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.”

When I read this verse from the words of the Prophet Malachi, I am caught by the dramatic intensity of what these lines mean. First, a messenger is coming – in the spirit and power of the great Prophet Elijah, as Malachi later says. And then, the LORD will suddenly come to His temple.

Great events, events of cosmic significance, are coming, says the Word of the Lord through the lips of Malachi. The LORD is coming. It sounds thrilling, and terrifying.

John the Baptist, the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy of a messenger with the spirit of Elijah, is a man who really holds before us the vision of God’s coming as thrilling and terrifying. His call to us is a call to *repentance*, a call of warning. “The ax is lying at the root of the trees,” he says, “bear fruits worthy of repentance.” He tells us that the Messiah is coming, to gather the wheat and burn the chaff. He tells us that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

If we just keep reading John the Baptist through this season of Advent, it will be quite the antidote to a consumption-focused Christmas, or to tidy, sentimentalized Christmas songs.

Christmas is beautiful. The story of the birth of Jesus is wonderful, and miraculous, and joyful and inspiring. But it is not sappy or tame. Jesus, the baby in the manger, grows up, and when he enters the Temple, he drives out the money changers and merchants with whips!

Jesus calls his followers to a holiness that is demanding. He calls us to turn from selfishness and sin, and plunge into the Christian life. To give our all for the sake of the world, as he does.

In our opening prayer, the collect for Advent II today, we called to mind all the prophets who preached repentance. And we asked for grace to “heed their warnings and forsake our sins.”

This season leading up to Christmas is a time when we can become so preoccupied by presents, and parties, perhaps excesses of food and drink. When we can become focused on entertaining and gratifying ourselves.

And it is a season when many around us may be especially suffering – grieving or in need. Some mourning that they can’t offer their children or loved ones the kind of Christmas they see advertised. Some missing loved ones who are gone. A season when people around the world are suffering from violence. Or are pursuing it.

In *this* season, John the Baptist’s call urges us to look at this world and this season with different eyes. The center of the season is not the presents under the tree, it is the coming of God. And that is good news, even though it demands that we rethink our priorities. Actually, it’s good news because it demands that we rethink our priorities.

God is coming. He came to the earth at the first Christmas, and he is coming again. God is coming, so we can’t only make plans for holiday fun. We also have to plan how we will make peace with someone we’ve hurt. We can’t only remember our loved ones with gifts – we must

also remember those who have no one to love them, and give our love to the friendless, the lonely, the lost, and the unlovable.

But I said that this was good news! It is good news, because the great secret that we named right out loud in our opening prayer is that this kind of reorientation of priorities brings happiness. Repentance leads to joy.

I think the word “repent” might make us think we have to berate ourselves and think about how bad we are – our selfishness and flaws. It might make us think of doing burdensome, painful penance for our sins.

But actually, “repent” means to “turn” our focus. To shift our priorities towards those that really matter.

Priorities like love. Like loving God, enjoying the beauty of worship in this season. Like Loving our friends and family, and telling and showing them that we love them. Like loving humanity, and making time for the luxury of service – which feels great once you’re off the couch and doing it! When repentance means turning to love, it isn’t a punishment. It’s a joy. Even if it’s sometimes hard work, too.

When repentance means turning to holiness, it means releasing all the clinging sins that drag our souls down. Recognizing our sinfulness, but then letting go of resentment, of self-centeredness, of pride that keeps us from apologizing, or forgiving. Or letting go even of the righteous anger that can fill up our hearts and leave little room for happiness, love, and joy.

We might think that repentance is about feeling guilty. But actually, *sin* is about feeling guilty. Sin makes us feel crummy about the things we’ve done, miserable and angry with ourselves, and ashamed towards other people.

Repentance can still be hard work. It involves fighting old habits of thinking and acting. It involves the hard work of apologizing, and forgiving. But it’s work worth doing, that makes our hearts more capable of real joy.

Repentance – making the conscious decision to turn away from sin and back to God – feels great. It feels like a weight off your shoulders, a clearing of your heart, and new hope.

The prophets call us to repentance. They call us to turn towards God, towards love, towards holiness. They call us to clear our hearts of the sin that clings so close, so that our hearts have plenty of room for joy.

In this season of Advent, of the coming of God, we prepare our hearts once more to be able to experience the joy, the wonder, the miracle of the child in the manger. The wonder and joy and miracle of God’s infinite love for us. His unceasing reaching out to us – calling our hearts to Him, our true source of joy.

We prepare our hearts because God promises to come again – in spirit, and in the flesh – so that we ourselves will get to experience the miracle of God’s presence just like Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the angels.

And so we repent, in Advent, and every day. Reorienting our priorities, turning our hearts, towards God, towards love, towards hope, towards joy. Amen.