Advent 2, Dec 9: Malachi 3:1–7b

**Other Lessons:** Psalm 66:1–12; Philippians 1:2–11; Luke 3:1–14 (15–20)

The theme of “preparation” or “to made ready” for the coming of the Lord is found throughout the Old and New Testament, though it is not always as obvious because it is more of a subtheme under the promises of the coming messiah. When you see these passages of the promise of the coming Christ, behind them is this question, “the Lord, God himself will act and come to you, how do you prepare yourselves?” And this question is not asking what you are going to do “when” he comes in the future, but rather, what are you going to do today to be ready?

Our text today in Malachi 3 not only asks this question, but it is actually a direct response to the people’s unreadiness in 2:17 (which should be the beginning of this section since chapter/verse divisions are artificial). Last week in Jeremiah 33, we heard of God’s promise of a righteous branch from David, even in the midst of their impending destruction. God will save them once again and restore their land and all things. If you read the previous chapter (Jer32), even Jeremiah himself was unsure of God’s promises. The destruction was right in front of his eyes, how can there be anything left for a comeback. How can there be a Jerusalem and even a king to sit on her throne? But God’s promises are sure and certain, and about a hundred years later, the people came back, rebuilt the city and the temple. BUT the former glory and prosperity has not returned. And now almost 200 years later, things are still not so great with the people of God, so they began to falter in their faith.

This is shown in 2:17: “You have wearied the Lord with your words. But you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?”

God seems so far away that the people were drawn to the ways of the world, which seem much closer to them than God. And we too feel this all the time in our own lives, doesn’t it? The nations around them were prospering, and usually by unjust and wicked means. They do evil and there doesn’t seem to be any consequences, in fact, they seemed to be rewarded with a good life. And so the people say, quietly in their own wicked hearts: “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.” Their own evil desires in their hearts have led them away from the Laws of God. They have followed the way of the world.

Not only that, they were drawn to the religions of the other nations as well. The people around them practiced paganism, idolatry, and all sorts of unholy religious traditions, and they seem to work, that is to say, their gods and goddess seem more reliable than the God of Israel and Judah. God cannot be seen or heard, but these pagan gods and goddess seem to get immediate results. Why bother with this God when there are so many other “better” options out there? So they ask, as if God cannot hear or answer: “Where is the God of justice?” The people have become complacent, even indifferent to the word of God. They were blaspheming God with such boldness because they didn’t believe that God would actually care.

Where is God? A question that is not all too foreign to our own ears and mouths. We’ve heard people ask that and we ourselves may have asked it too during difficult and trying times. We feel as though God is so far away, so distant, that we must now rely on our own wits and methods to survive. So we learn from the world. We follow after their gods (which now includes the “self” as our own god).

And so God responds. He did not stay silent and let the people wrongly accuse God of injustice and indifference. And he responds tenderly for he cares for his people and yet at the same time, he responds with a tone of sternness. “Behold,” says God, “I will send my messenger.” This is what the name Malachi means in Hebrew, “my messenger”. By sending his messenger, God sends his word, which is to bring assurance and faith and strength among the people. With the presence of his word, it is as though God himself is present. Throughout the ages, God has sent numerous prophets to call people back to himself. They preached repentance and faith so that the people may hear, return, repent, and be ready to receive and welcome the promised Christ. Through the prophet Malachi, God was indeed near his people. He was in their midst to call them back to himself.

And God came even nearer through John the Baptist, who was prophesied here as the messenger who will prepare the way before him. The fact that John came shows that the prophecy was true and that God’s promise of salvation is close at hand. And John too preached the same message of repentance and faith, which necessarily produces good fruits, so that people would be ready to receive the Christ when he arrives. God came near the people through his preaching for many came and believed and were baptized. God was indeed at work through all his prophets.

But the greatest work and presence is when God himself came in the flesh. God himself came as the messenger of the covenant, to proclaim and establish that everlasting covenant with all people. But here in verse 2, God (through Malachi) quickly asks the challenging questions: “Who can endure his coming? Who can stand his appearing?” Indeed, Jesus comes to save, but he will also come to purify and purge all evil. And this is the paradox of the cross: it is the way of salvation but at the same time, his death on the cross is a judgment and condemnation of sin. Those who cling to their sins, those remain in their sin will not stand or endure his judgment and condemnation. Those who refuse to acknowledge their sin will not find repentance and the forgiveness of sins, for they are unwilling to, not because it is unavailable.

But there is another paradox: the messenger IS the message. Jesus IS the word of God, he is the good news. Therefore he must suffer, he must die, because he can stand, he can endure the full wrath of God, for the entire world. That’s why verse 6 God says that we are not consumed by his fire and wrath only be because he does not change. His faithfulness to his own promises, his love and mercy and compassion for us does not and cannot change, therefore his own son was consumed. And the good news of this message is that everything is done for you, and it is yours simply through believing.

This is the readiness and preparedness that God requires in these words. His messengers came to preach repentance and faith in the coming messiah. Will the people have faith and keep it? When the Christ actually came and offered himself for the sins of the world, will the people have faith and keep it? And today the same message is in your midst. The lord comes to you today to offer repentance, faith, forgiveness, and all good things, will you believe and keep it? God is always near us, to always bring us to repentance and faith, so that we might rightly receive him and be saved. Sometimes we might feel like the Israelites who wonder if God is actually near to his people. Sometimes we feel tempted to follow the ways of the world, to cheat, lie, deceive, deal wickedly, be filled with anger and hatred. Sometimes we feel we need to be in charge and decide what is right and what is wrong for ourselves and those around us. But God sends his messenger to you that you might hear and return and be saved. That’s why it’s important to take every opportunity to hear the word. The word prepares and makes you ready for the Christ. This is God’s continual work in you through faith.

So if you are now ready for Christ, if you hear his word, believe it, baptized in it, eat and drink it, then you will be ready for him when he comes again. You will be ready for his fiery purifying, because it will only make you even purer to stand in his presence. So in repentance and with great expectation, wait for him because he is near.