

Malachi 3:1-4 Luke 3:1-6
06 Dec. 09

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What if ____ were coming to visit us? Now, I have to stop here and ask you to fill in the blank. Fill it in with some wise or famous personage, someone you'd really like to meet and talk with and ask questions of. You could fill that blank with a president, a pop star, a historical figure, someone like that, someone who would be of interest to a wide range of people here.

What if _____ were coming to visit us? wouldn't you want to be ready? Of course you would. Especially if you've ever had a chance encounter with one such personage. I remember someone telling me about meeting Lady Bird Johnson on the streets of Georgetown. This meeting caught her unawares. She came face to face with Lady Bird, recognized her, and could think of absolutely nothing to say. So she stammered. Must have been embarrassing.

If _____ were coming to see us, we wouldn't that to happen. We'd want to be prepared with the right things to say. And we'd want to have thought out the right questions to ask. And we'd probably want to clean up our act: make the place look nice, polish the silver, make sure we extended the right hospitality. Otherwise it might be a wasted visit and a lost opportunity.

As a matter of fact, some personages have advance teams to make sure this is exactly what happens. The president's advance team, for example, sees to all kinds of security and protocol issues so that his visit goes smoothly and sticks to schedule so that his visit is not a wasted one.

The parallels between what I've been talking about and the coming of Jesus are obvious. The advance team, of course, is John the Baptist. Pretty small advance team, that, but effective enough. He fulfills the necessary role as seen by the prophet Malachi. "See, I

am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me."

Malachi describes this advent of our God as something a bit fearful: "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" That's not a sentiment we tend to share these days. To quote Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "It's very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God . . . We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all, frightening news for everyone who has a conscience."

Yes, we who confess each week, "he will come again to judge the living and the dead," might at the least take stock of whether or not we're ready for this coming of our God. In words we'll hear next week John the Baptist speaks plainly of how to be ready. This week so does Malachi.

But before I get into that, I have to say that even with this warning to be extra serious about being ready for the coming of the LORD, the mood of these readings in Malachi and Luke are the moods of Advent: great expectation and anticipation and hope. The coming of the LORD is a fearful thing. And at the same time it is greatly to be longed for. It is to be longed for because the judgement that comes with the LORD's arrival is a judgement of cleansing, purifying, refining. When things seem hopeless and we seem to be hopelessly stuck in sin or fear or despair or destructive behavior, and there seems to be no way out of it, God will send someone to make a way, and God will come. God will make a way because God has no interest in letting anyone fail. God's cleansing judgement is a saving judgement. God comes through Malachi, through John the Baptist, and in Jesus to cleanse and to heal and to

save. This is a fearful thing, an awesome thing; and it is a thing to which to look forward with great joy and anticipation.

So, this week we hear from the advance team; we hear the words of those who were sent to prepare the way so that the coming of the LORD might not be wasted upon us but do us some real good.

And what is it that Malachi says? The words that leap out at me are prepare, refine, and purify—all leading to righteousness.

Righteousness, that constantly repeated Biblical word that means to live in a just and harmonious relationship with those whom God has given us and to look out for those who cannot look out for themselves, and to worship God. In what parts of your life is the Word of God most needed?

That's it. Nothing fancy or dramatic from Malachi. And next week when we hear from John it's pretty much going to be kindergarten morality. You want to be ready for the coming of the LORD?

Clean up your act. Get rid of those things which keep you from living in righteousness. Nothing fancy, nothing dramatic. Nothing easy either, is it?

Which is why these Biblical texts have more to do with self examination than they do with self improvement. And more to do with preparing and being ready than they do with making things perfect. It is the LORD that refines and purifies and saves. This Advent season is a time to remember again that he stands at the door and knocks. Are you ready to let him in?