

**“Preparing the Way without Wearing the Lord” based on Micah 2:17 to 3:7, Luke 3:1-6  
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on December 5, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Our reading today from the book of Malachi is one that resonates with me. You see, it’s about the failures of the priestly class in leading the people to the Lord. In this story, the once exiled people of Judah have been returned to their land, yet, they are not independent, but now a province of Persia’s empire. They have rebuilt the great temple to the Lord their God, yet, they are concerned that it feels like God’s presence is not there.

And so, the people are doubting God’s love for them. They doubt God’s faithfulness to them. And they doubt God’s justice for them. It seems they may even doubt God. And God is tired of it. What is it that has God tired of us? In what way have we wearied the Lord? They ask.

And the Lord says, it is their accusation that God delights in everyone who does evil, and their questioning where the Lord is, asking, ‘Where is the God of judgment?’ It’s not the questions themselves that weary the Lord, but it is the assumptions that lie beneath them, namely that they are the good people and they should be rewarded, while ‘others’ are evil, and they should be punished. And so, the Lord promises to come to them, but only after sending a messenger, who will purify the leaders first.

I read a book recently that questioned the role of pastors in our current age. The writer wondered if the job of a pastor was not to dispense information, or guard the prestige of their office, but to go first – to volunteer the truth, about their sins, their failures, their fears and in doing so, free others to do the same.

And it made me think of two of the pastors I’ve had in my life. One, a Roman Catholic priest who recently went into rehab for his alcoholism, and upon returning to the pulpit, shocked his bishop by confessing it all to his church. The other, a nondenominational pastor who always shared stories about himself, but not the flattering ones. No, the ones where he was the fool, at fault, the times when he made massive mistakes. Both of these pastors were, and still are extremely honest. They were the type of pastors the author dreamed of and I believe their honesty was a good thing, it kept them from being hypocrites.

Malachi warns religious leaders that the messenger will be like a smelting fire and a fuller’s soap. Now, a smelting fire is an image I understood and it’s the primary image here. This image is of valuable silver or gold being put in a fire and in the process, it become moldable, while all of the impurities in it are burned away.

That is easy to understand, but you might be asking what is meant by a fuller’s soap. Well, I had to look up what a fuller is, and as it turns out, it is someone who cleans wool. So, then I wondered what a fuller’s soap is, and this was a bit eye-opening. So, today, we might use Woolite, which is a mild form of this kind of soap, but before that was invented, harsh burning chemicals were used. In Roman times, human urine was used – never thought I’d mention human urine in a sermon. So much was saved that the collection of human urine was taxed.

And in the time when Malachi was written, the soap would have been lye, a harsh chemical, but it also involved the beating of the wool, with clubs in the river or watershed.

I don't know about you, but if I imagine myself as the silver or the wool in these processes, 'well, this messenger doesn't seem too pleasant,' but notice these processes do not destroy, rather they refine, purify, and mold, clearing out all that isn't meant to be there. For us, it hurts to be reshaped, but what is left, is us in the image of God.

And so, like the two pastors I've admired so much over the years, I want to admit something. I so thoroughly enjoyed Carol Ann's sermon last week and it had me energized. All God wants for Christmas is me, my whole self, all of me, good and bad. But I barely made it 24 hours before I had lost sight of this entirely, and was left to question: How am I preparing myself for the Lord? How am I preparing others for the coming of the Lord? My need for refinement, smelting in the fire, or a good beating in the river with some lye, became extremely evident.

You see, it was 12:45 and I had to get Josephine home and myself back to the church by 1:15. I was parked over where Carol Ann usually parks, before the entrance, and when I got outside, my anxiety started to pique: How was I going to get out? It was early for the line to form, but it had. But rather than walking over to the car next in line and explain my intentions, I exasperatedly proclaimed to Abby, 'I'm never going to get out.' I chose to complain, rather than do what was right.

I got in my car and put it in reverse, slowly backing out, knowing I was fully blocked still, and made eye contact enough that my intentions were known, or so I thought, with the car that was next. I thought for sure I'd be let out. So then, as the car blocking me in pulled forward, I started to back out in earnest, that's when the driver of that next car, whom I thought I'd made eye contact with, pulls in quickly behind me blocking me in yet again.

Frustrated, I slapped down my shifter with one hand, honking the horn with the other. My car jolted forward, and my inner New York and New Jersey was on display, minus any profanity, I proclaimed my pessimism again, closed my window and groaned loudly, then creatively maneuvered my way, to back out and go out Holland St. All with Josephine being my better self and saying, "it's ok papa, I don't like traffic either."

In that moment, I was a petulant child, caught up in myself, wanting to get my way. I was like the Levite priests that the Lord speaks against in our Malachi text. In that moment, I was at fault, frustrated that I let this very thing happen, and yet, I wanted blame that person in the other car for everything. Why God? Why did you let that person cut me off? Why didn't you prompt me to park in a different place? You know I have to get home quickly, why? Why?

In this way, I have no doubt I wearied God, but notice that God does not leave Judah, and so, I can know from this, that God has not left me, merely because of this sin. Rather, it was I, who left God. That's what sin is – it is when we turn our backs on God and take control, go our own way. What wearies God is not that we sin, but that we blame God or others for our sin, or we make excuses, explaining away our sins, how they weren't that bad.

We ask God to ignore our own sins, which is different than forgiveness. Forgiveness is a judgement and a sentence of mercy. We want God to ignore even those sins we continue committing, while wondering why God won't judge someone else's sins. We refuse to prepare the way for the Lord in ourselves and put stumbling blocks in the way of others. This is all human nature.

When the messenger came, Luke tells us it was John, the son of Zechariah the temple priest, and while John is a harsh critic of the Pharisees and other religious leaders, John baptizes anyone who comes to him. He is raising the lowly, humbling the proud. You see, in Exodus, God promises to make Israel a priestly nation, a nation that is the mediator between God and the world, but when they fall short of this, one tribe steps into the role, to be the mediator between God and Israel itself, rather than between God and the world.

When Jesus arrives, he is the true temple, the meeting place of God and humanity, he is the true priest, the mediator between God and all of humanity, and he is the sacrifice, he is the means by which all are made right with God. By this – by God sharing in our humanity in the birth of Jesus, and by Jesus dying on the cross, letting sin do its worst to him, and then rising again to new life, defeating sin and death – we become like temples, holders of God's Holy Spirit, we become members of a royal priesthood, and we follow Christ to the cross.

John's baptism of repentance is the turning back that the Lord asked for in Malachi. The Lord says, 'turn back to me and I will turn back to you.' The word 'turn back' in Hebrew is the word we often translate as repent. If sin is us turning away from God to try to do things of our own accord, then true repentance is turning back to God with our whole self. And John does not seek to refine only those called priests, but all who seek the Lord, valuing every single believer as a priest in service of the Lord, just as Jesus does. In preparing the way of the Lord, John seeks to prepare the hearts of all, all who would turn back to God in true repentance, without excuses.

My sisters and brothers, it does me no good to make excuses before you or before God. There is no explanation that excuses the obstacles I put in the path of another, when I reflected poorly in that moment on the God I claim to serve. All I can do is tell the truth about my sins, my failures, and my fears, and hope that where I may have put the Lord's path in disarray, I might lead the way, helping to prepare the way for others, to confess sins and turn back to God's infinite love.

Now, maybe I'm wrong to assume that any of you out there have sinned or make mistakes. Perhaps, in a hectic holiday season, you've got everything done and you keep your cool. Maybe you sing along without a moment of cringing when you hear, Andy Williams singing that this is 'the most wonderful time of the year,' as you're trying to get Christmas cards and all your shopping done, along with decorating and trying to fit in a little fun.

Or maybe you just don't want to hear about your pastor in the same struggle as you, and you really only want to come here for easy answers from a flawless leader. Well, the reality is that what you have is a pastor who is a work in progress, every single one of the people who fill this role is – even the ones who act like they're perfect.

My hope is that I can work every day to make fewer mistakes, trying to cultivate better and better practices, knowing that when I inevitably make a mistake, making excuses for that mistake is useless. Instead of making excuses, my only recourse is to repent, to turn back to God. That's my hope for me, and my hope for you.

In this Advent season, let's remember that the color up here is purple for a reason. This is a season of preparation that starts with repentance, turning back to God, because the beauty of the gospel is that when we turn back, when we repent, we find that God is right there because God has been pursuing us all along.

When we heed the cry of the messenger John in the wilderness, there may be some pain in letting go of our own control, but when we do, we better reflect our God who is with us. We reflect our Lord Jesus, and we prepare the way for him, so that all flesh may see the salvation of the Lord, in us and God's love for the. Amen.