

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“The Pre-Season”

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Reverend Art Ritter

Malachi 3:1-4

3See, 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. ²But 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; ³he 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. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3: 1-6

3In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

*⁵Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;*

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”’

I recently found the following description of the Christmas season. The only thing I know about the author is that the last name is “O’Rourke.”

“Christmas begins about the first of December with an office party. It ends when you finally realize what you have spent, around April 15th. Christmas has replaced Lent as the period of penance. Christmas is when you punish yourself for having spent eleven months claiming to be friends with a pack of useless and nasty people you hardly know. Now you are forced to go out and buy each of them an expensive gift. In

return you'll receive a dozen bottles of strawberry wine cooler and a pair of Louis Vitton earmuffs..."

"There is a remarkable breakdown of taste and intelligence at Christmas time. Mature, responsible, grown men wear neckties made out of holly leaves and drink alcoholic beverages with raw egg and cottage cheese in them...The only thing that's even slightly interesting about Christmas is the office party. It's nice to see the people at work admitting that they are drunk and not getting anything done. The worst part is the dinner with the family, when you realize how truly mutated and crippled is the gene stock from which you have sprung. It is customarily said that Christmas is done 'for the kids.' Considering how awful Christmas is and how little our society really likes children, this must be true."

After reading this, all I can say is "Bah, humbug!" This writer may have gotten a little carried away with things. But if we are completely honest, these words may carry a kernel of truth. The Christmas season is an endless rat race. We spend hours looking for a parking spot at the mall or searching the web, stretching the limits of our credit card to find just the right gift. There is decorating the tree and lighting up the outdoors just a bit. There are school programs and recitals. There is baking and Christmas cards. There are church activities, and family and office gatherings. This time of year is supposed to be joyous but it is filled with perhaps the most anxiety of any. As a matter of fact, December is probably the busiest time for our mental health professionals.

A few years ago, a well-intended person was having a conversation with my wife Laura. The woman said, "I know that your husband is a minister. I bet you and your family are really excited about Christmas coming!" Laura said that she wanted to unload about the demands of the holiday at church upon the stress of an already complicated life. No, she wanted to say, I am not excited about Christmas coming. But she smiled sweetly and said, "Yes."

We tend to blame our Christmas frustration on the secular world. We say, "It's those darn stores! They put up their decorations before Halloween!" We curse the radio stations that put on the all-Christmas programming long before we have purchased the Thanksgiving turkey. Yes, it does seem like Christmas is drawn forward and rushed into place each year. We blame the movies, television, and advertisers for creating the concept of a perfect Christmas all the while we are trying to accomplish it. Yes, the simplicity of the holiday is complicated by our secular obligations more and more each year.

But could it be that we only have ourselves to blame? Could it be that we have become frustrated about our Christmas simply because of our need to celebrate something? Could it be that we have come to resent the Christmas expectations because we have forgotten what is it that we are supposed to expect this season?

My theory, prejudiced by the fact that I am a minister, is that we have neglected the importance of Advent. Certainly, we light the candles of the Advent wreath. We sing those strange songs written in a minor key for one week. If we sang them any more than that most of you would revolt. But we generally are in a rush to move right into Christmas. Why not? Advent is the just the warm-up act for the main event on December 25th. For those of you old like me, Advent is Ed McMahon when we are waiting for Johnny Carson. And Advent's main character, John the Baptist, has the personality of a porcupine. How can you give attention to a man who calls you to

repentance and a serious, severe reorientation of one's life? That just doesn't seem very Christmassy! Why talk about the necessity of change when we can talk about babies and angels and shepherds. The concept of Advent doesn't lend itself to the support of the American economy or to our desire for pleasure and entertainment so we in fact tend to deny its importance.

The Scripture lesson from the prophet Malachi anticipates that God will send a messenger before the Messiah, someone with preparatory work to do. The messenger will be like an advance committee, a "transition team," establishing procedure and security before the one yet to come arrives. According to Malachi, the messenger has a lot to do. The metaphors in this piece of Scripture are brilliant. He will be like a strong soap, disinfecting and purifying. He will be like a fire that refines metal, cleansing and straining. The work of the messenger is purification, so that when the Lord suddenly comes there are pure ones who will recognize him.

In the past few months, all of us have grown accustomed to washing our hands real well. The threat of the H1NI virus has us checking to see if the alcohol content on our sanitizers is over 60% or if the disinfectant we use kills over 99% of the germs. There is an emphasis on purity. Malachi says that the work to be done before the coming of God is one of cleansing our world and our lives like a good hand scrubbing, eliminating the germs and viruses so we are pure to receive the holy presence. I read somewhere this week in all of the Tiger Woods' revelations, a piece of advice taught to one sportswriter. He wrote, "The happiest people are those who live with the cleanest hands."

The early church saw this hand washing messenger as John the Baptist. In the gospel lesson Luke describes John as the one who does the hard, careful, and often ruthless work of preparation for the birth of Jesus. John isn't a real likeable character. He doesn't pull any punches. He isn't the stuff of sentimental Hallmark holiday cards or television holiday specials. His message wasn't Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays! He was more like the ones carrying signs and yelling on street corners, the ones we cross the street to avoid. "Repent! Change your ways! Examine your loyalties and priorities!" John spoke to the comfortable, self-satisfied religious people like us and told them they had to change. This isn't the way we like to celebrate Christmas.

But people of faith found Malachi's prophecy useful in understanding this strange character, John the Baptist. He prepared the stage for Jesus. He introduced the act to the waiting crowd. He was the one who came to make sure our hands were washed and the floors were mopped. He was the one who arrived the morning before the party began to set up the tables and chairs. He was the trainer who pushed people to exercise their weak muscles to get them in shape before the race began. John represented the pre-season to the meaning of Christmas, doing that which had to happen before the birth of Christ could be welcomed, understood, or even noticed.

The pre-season must come before the main event. John the Baptist must come before Jesus. Advent must be observed before that which is the gift of Christmas can live in our hearts and our lives. What would John say to us today? Oh, we would be an easy target. It probably would be quite frightening. I'm not certain he would have enough soap or hand sanitizer to clean us up to his standards. But he wouldn't hesitate to point out what we must do in this pre-season.

You must put yourself in a place where you yearn for God. We learn at an early age that if we don't make a Christmas list we probably won't get what we want for Christmas. Likewise, if we don't establish the fact that we need the presence of God in our lives we will not receive that presence no matter how well we plan and prepare for Christmas. To be ready for the gift of the Christ Child is to acknowledge how eager we are to be reconciled to God and to intentionally invite God's spirit of change into our meaningless routines.

You need to be made clean. Yes, we're all getting a little tired of people telling us to wash our hands. But we need to clean up our acts. We need to examine our lifestyles, our priorities and relationships, the way we use our time and money, and the words we use with our loved ones, our friends at church or even the store clerk we have never met before. We need to be honest about what we really worship. This isn't easy. Repentance, sacrifice, and change are not our idea of Yuletide cheer. But the gift of God at Christmas should not come cheap or without appreciation. Purify your thoughts, your words, your relationships, and your stewardship of time, money, and energy.

You must reflect upon who is the one to be born in Bethlehem. He is not a king born to make our lives easier and more comfortable. He came to serve but not to serve us so that we might simply rest easy in victory. Jesus brought a new rule to earth, a rule of mercy and justice. The one for whom we prepare is one who calls us to serve others. The gift of God to us should move us to be the gift of God to others and to our world.

The pre-season. How do we prepare? We tend to choose the usual approach. Shopping. Baking. Social Events. Decorating. It is what we know and what we think we supposed to do. We can measure its success against our calendars and by our own weariness. But the one who is to come, the one whom the prophet and the Baptist point toward, is one isn't coming to reward our comfort or to give us praise for what we are right now. He is coming to ask us to follow. He is coming to help us be like him. He is coming to raise more questions than answers. He is coming. This is the pre-season.