

Advent 2C (12/6/09 – *Preparing the Way for Christ's Coming*)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord Whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple; and the Messenger of the covenant in Whom you delight, behold, He is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears? [MAL 3.1-2] Thus says the Word of the Lord through His messenger, Malachi – as we heard. *I've got some good news and some bad news.* That seems to be the message ... the promise ... the prophecy. The Lord is coming! That is good news! But then we hear a warning: *who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears?!* Not so good news – in fact, bad news. For the Lord does not change – as He says later in our *Old Testament* reading [MAL 3.6]. And He promises to *be a swift Witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear Me, says the LORD of hosts* [3.5].

That means that He will witness against **us**, **too**, of course – against you and me and the whole world. We **all** will be judged – swiftly, objectively, on an absolute scale ... which is to say, **without** a curve. And another thing doesn't change – this side of the Day of the Lord and heaven – namely, **our** sinfulness ... **our** rebellion ... **our** turning aside from the statutes of the Lord and **not** keeping them [3.7]. We are among that *brood of vipers* that John rails against out there in the wilderness – the ones needing *to flee from the wrath to come* [LK 3.7]. We need to *bear fruits in keeping with repentance* ... and not rely on our past. Because of our sins, *even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees ... and every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire* [LK 3.8,9].

So with the crowds, we ask John: *What then shall we do?* And John's answer is the same now as it was back then – for John's answer is the Lord's ... since he is the messenger sent before the face of the Lord *Preparing the Way for Christ's Coming* ... and the LORD does not change. To **everyone** John says: *Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise* [3.11]. We are, according to our

vocations – our *place in life according to the Ten Commandments* as Luther puts it – to be God’s instruments in providing for the earthly needs of those who are suffering. To the tax collectors John says: ***Collect no more than you are authorized to do*** [3.13]. To the soldiers he says: ***Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages*** [3.14]. We could paraphrase and generalize John’s responses using Luther’s explanation on *Confession* ... specifically, the part regarding what sins we need to confess: *Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?* [SC v.3] Luther surely bases his teaching in the Catechism on the example set by John in our *Gospel*.

So, part of ***Preparing the Way for Christ’s Coming*** is to review our lives according to God’s Holy Law ... and **repent** of our sins ... however great or small they are ... bearing the fruits of faith that correspond to such repentance. Otherwise, we may find our sinful selves reckoned among the chaff to be burned with unquenchable fire when our Lord returns in glory [LK 3.17]. Part of ***Preparing the Way for Christ’s Coming*** is to return to the LORD ... bringing ***offerings in righteousness to the LORD*** [MAL 3.3,6]. But how shall we manage it – since we know all too well that the paths of our lives are crooked, not straight ... rough, not level [LK 3.5]?

That is precisely why the Lord sends His messengers before Him ... so that they – as God’s instruments – may ***prepare the way of the Lord*** [LK 3.4]. Or, to put it another way, the Lord **Himself** prepares His way in your life through His Means of Grace – through the preaching of His Word and the administration of His Holy Sacraments according to His command.

You see, it is through the preaching of the Law – through the mouth of Malachi, John, Luke, Paul ... and all those whom God has called as His messengers – that the Holy Spirit convicts you of your sin. And in this way the Holy Spirit first prepares the way of the Lord. For without knowledge of your sin ... and without dread for your sin and its consequences ... and without repentance of sin, you do not hunger and thirst to have your path

straightened, your valleys filled, your mountains and hills made low, your crookedness made straight, or your rough places leveled out. So a harsh ***You brood of vipers!*** – or, as we might understand it, *You sons of that ancient serpent, satan* – a dismembering of trust in our own heritage, and a pointing out of our sins and our sinfulness are just the thing to get our attention.

And once we are thus brought low, then come the called messengers of the Lord with the blessed proclamation of the Gospel – the Good News of God’s steadfast mercy and love for us because of Christ. It is the message that ***the LORD does not change***; and ***therefore you ... are not consumed*** [MAL 3.6]. It is the message that the LORD Himself will refine and purify you – like gold and silver – so that your offerings ... indeed ***you yourself*** ... are righteous before the LORD. And the message ***that He Who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the Day of Jesus Christ*** [PHI 1.6].

What Paul is really getting at is the same thing that is front and center in John the Baptizer’s ministry – namely, Baptism. God ***began a good work in you*** at your Holy Baptism ... when you first believed. There, through His called servant, He grafted you into Him Who is the Tree of Life – your Messiah and Savior, Jesus Christ. In the desert – beyond the Jordan – John was ***proclaiming a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins***. He preaches and administers a Baptism that is associated with repentance ... a Baptism that at the same time exhorts repentance and also graciously brings the receiver ***into*** forgiveness of sins that Jesus the Messiah will work through His own “baptism of fire” on the Cross.

And it is no mere happenstance that God sent John to preach out there in the desert. Once, long ago – long before John came preaching and baptizing – the children of Israel passed through the waters of the Jordan at God’s command ... to cross over from their wilderness wanderings into the land God had promised to give to Abraham’s offspring [GEN 13.7]. So, likewise, have you been made – by God’s gracious deliverance – to pass from your own wilderness of sin into the Promised Land of the Kingdom of God through the waters of your Holy Baptism. At Baptism the axe was laid to the root of your problem – your sin. And immediately God grafted you into Christ – grafted you into His death and resurrection ... into the fruit He bore worthy of repentance ... and into the fiery zeal of His Holy Spirit Who

kindles and keeps aglow in you a living faith. In your Baptism God has taken your sin-dead, stony heart and replaced it with a heart of faith – raising you up to be a child of Abraham ... one of His offspring by faith. In your Baptism God has made you an heir of the Promised Land – not the mere earthly one, where the Canaanites used to dwell ... but the eternal, heavenly Promised Land, where all the saints of God dwell forever.

God *began a good work in you* at your Baptism and He will continue to work repentance and faith in you until He has you safely in His heavenly mansions – *bringing it to completion at the Day of Jesus Christ* when He raises your body to immortality and sinless perfection. And the way God continues His good work in you is by weekly – daily – returning you to your Holy Baptism. In a sense, the totality of your existence can be seen in Baptism: your sin, your death to sin, your being raised to newness of life, your resurrection to eternal life.

And it is all tied to the One Whose way John prepared – it is all tied to Christ. For your sin has been placed upon Christ – indeed, as the Scripture says: *For our sake [God] made Him to be sin Who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God* [2COR 5.21]. That is why He came. That was the purpose of His First Advent. And your Savior was baptized with the fire of God's wrath against your sin upon the Cross. In your Baptism you have died with Christ – died to sin. And just as your Messiah rose to newness of life on the Third Day, so also have you been raised to a new life characterized by repentance, forgiveness, and faith. And finally, just as your Christ – the true and inherently Righteous One – ascended into heaven, so shall you be lifted up to the very heavens at your death and on the resurrection of all flesh on the Day of Christ. For even as Christ was *pure and blameless* before His Father, so also has the Father made you to be *pure and blameless* before Him **in Christ** through Baptism. And even as Christ was filled righteousness, so also are you *filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God* [PHI 1.10,11]. All of this God began and continues to work in you for your good through your Baptism, *Preparing the Way for Christ's Coming* to you ... and, ultimately, for your coming to Him in heaven.

In the Name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]