

12/6/09

THE OLD TESTAMENT LESSON Malachi 3:1–7b

(God promises to send a messenger to prepare the people for the Messiah's coming.)

1 "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

2 But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, 4 and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. 5 "So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty. 6 "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. 7 Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty.

THE EPISTLE LESSON Philippians 1:2–11

(St. Paul prays that God would complete the good work He began in us when our Lord returns.)

2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 6 being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. 7 It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. 8 God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ-- to the glory and praise of God.

THE GOSPEL LESSON Luke 3:1–20

(John the Baptist comes to prepare the people to meet the Messiah.)

1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar-- when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene-- 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **4 As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert,**

**'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.
5 Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.
6 And all mankind will see God's salvation.'**

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

10 "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

11 John answered, **"The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."**

12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" **13 "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.**

14 Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely-- be content with your pay."

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. 16 John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. 19 But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, 20 Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

INTRO - Yesterday we had a meeting, an Adult Education Board meeting. What's so new about that? Well, nothing. But, we needed a meeting to get prepared. We have an important guest coming. Dr. Paul Maier, Doctor of Ancient History, Vice-President of the LCMS, and award winning author is coming to St. John. He'll be making presentations that will help us to understand God in his Word better. But, with someone important coming we want to be ready.

I. That's what John was doing in today's lesson, preparing people for the coming of someone special.

A. The people didn't know it, but this was his job.

1. Isaiah had foretold John's coming. **4 As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. 5 Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. 6 And all mankind will see God's salvation."**

2. John was preparing people for the coming of Jesus, which was actually the coming of the Lord, as Isaiah says.

3. You think we have someone special coming! When Jesus comes you want to be ready.

B. So John told the people how to make the road to their hearts ready, how to make the crooked straight, the valley and hills smooth.

1. John called the people to repentance.

2. He called them to admit their sins and change their lives.

3. The tax collectors were to stop cheating, and act honestly. The soldiers were to stop using force and be satisfied with their lot. All people were to turn from their sin, and seek to live holy and righteous, faithful and loving lives in preparation for Jesus.

C. Guess what, we're preparing for Jesus' coming too.

1. In one way we are celebrating the coming of God himself, the coming of Jesus that first Christmas in mystery and wonder and love.

2. But, we are also preparing to meet Jesus when he comes again, as John portrays him, as the judge, the one who is making the threshing floor, the house of God clean.

3. John calls us to repentance too, admitting our sin and seeking to change our lives for Jesus' sake. 4. He calls us to turn from greed, from lust, from anger, from doubt, from desires of our flesh. He calls us to turn to Him in faith, and to treat others in love.

II. But, it is not easy to repent. I think you've heard this story before. When I was young I got in trouble in school a lot. My grandfather used to try to help me, and one way he helped me was he gave me a jar where I could put a dime every time I didn't get in trouble, didn't have to stand in the corner, or the cloak room, or go to the principal. When I got 20 dimes, \$2.00, he would take me out for lobster, which is what it cost in Massachusetts in those days. But, if I had a bad day, all the dimes came out and I had to start again. One day I had gotten in trouble. I went to his house, but I didn't say anything. I was close to my 20 dimes. So I said nothing. Near the end of lunch he said, "how was school today?" I didn't want to admit my trouble. I didn't want to start over. But, he asked, and I told him. You know, repentance is hard.

A. For one thing we don't always want to admit our sins because we know there are consequences.

1. God has told us that the wages of sin is death.
2. We know that the troubles of this life are the result of our own failures, many of the times.
3. But, we don't like others to know, and we don't want the punishment, so it can be hard to admit our sin.

B. Changing our lives is hard too.

1. I didn't want to act up in class. But, sometimes, well, you know how it goes.
2. Many people have a specific weakness, or habit, or sin their struggle with.
3. People try, but it is hard.
4. Paul described this struggle with sin in Romans 7:19, ***For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do-- this I keep on doing.***

C. Repentance, admitting our sin and turning from it, may be the obvious and only way to prepare for Jesus. But, repentance is not easy!

III. There is a difference in John's message that can help us with preparing for Jesus, that can help us with repentance.

A. We are told the people were wondering if John was that hoped for, mysterious, promised Messiah. **15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. 16 John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."**

1. You see, John does not point the people to their own power to repent.
2. John does not point people to himself.
3. John points people to Jesus, the one who is coming.

B. You see, Jesus will come again as Judge, but Jesus first came as Savior.

1. In love he lived and died for people who rejected Him.
2. In power He rose again and overcame sin and death.
3. Jesus comes bringing forgiveness.
4. John doesn't just say get ready for Jesus, he points the people to Jesus. And, Jesus helped them, and Jesus helps us to repent.

C. Think about it, Jesus helps me to repent.

1. If I know I'll be punished, I am hesitant to confess. But, if I know Jesus has already forgiven me, that He loves me in spite of my sin, then I can admit my struggle, my sin, my uncleanness.
2. Jesus comes baptizing, with the Holy Spirit. Do you know that by His Spirit God helps us to believe in Jesus, to know He loves us in spite of our sin. By His Spirit God helps us to live for Jesus.
3. Today 2 young people were baptized. They were forgiven, they were given the Spirit. They were strengthened, in this world of struggle and sin, to live a new life because of the forgiveness and love of Jesus.

4. Today, Jesus comes to us in the Lord's Supper. In power and love, in body and blood, God forgives us.
5. The love and forgiveness of Jesus helps us to confess our sin, makes us want to live in faith and love, and prepares us for His coming.

CONCLUSION - I've told you about my grandfather and the jar of dimes before, though many of you had not heard the story. But, there is something I haven't told you. That day, when he asked how school went, when he found out I had done wrong and I had to empty the jar, he let me put another dime in. I didn't deserve it. I'd been in trouble. But, he told because I had been honest, he put a dime in I didn't deserve. Really, I got to do that because of his love. Even in my failure I knew his love and forgiveness, and I was more willing to admit my failures, and I wanted even more to be good.

The most important being in the universe, the Lord of all Himself, is coming. He calls us to admit our sin and turn from our sin to prepare for His coming. Because He has come in love, in forgiveness, we are able to repent, to admit our sins and turn from them, and to keep seeking to live holy lives, lives set apart for Him, lives of faith and love.