

The Fear of Home

PEACE COMMUNION

December 5, 2021

Malachi 3:1-4

¹ See, 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. ² But 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; ³ he 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. ⁴ Then 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

¹ In 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, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as 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. ⁵ Every 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; ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"



Welcome to the second Sunday of Advent. Today we lit the candle of peace. Today we wrestle with “The Fear of Home.” For many of us, in the literal sense, going home brings up positive thoughts and emotions. But for some, the thought of going home raises other emotions and thoughts. Some have experienced pain at home. Some have felt unfairly judged or neglected at home. Along these same lines, we can all recall times when we have not provided the sense of home that we wanted to. We can think back to situations where we should have been more loving, more accepting, more forgiving, less critical, less judgmental, less harsh. It is never too late to offer words of grace and acts of reconciliation. It is never too late to change how home is understood or perceived or experienced.

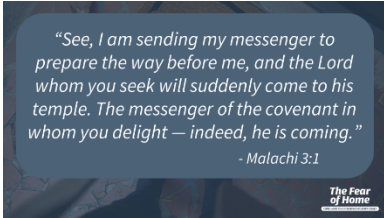
On the spiritual level, there are many who are glad, even long to come home each Sunday. Here many of us find peace and comfort, support and fellowship, belonging and love. But for some, church is not that place. For some, church has been a place of judgment, of hypocrisy, of bad experiences. Today, as we approach the table of grace, as we come to confess and repent, we desire to enter God’s presence, to be made new again, to be freed from all that weighs us down. Yet for some – and maybe even some here today – this table is a place that is feared, a place to be avoided. We have all struggled to confess our sins at times, to be honest with God and ourselves every now and then. Maybe you, like me, have felt unworthy of coming to this place of mercy and forgiveness. Then it is easier to stay seated in the chair or pew. Easier yet, some choose to stay away altogether.

As we delve into the prophecy in Malachi and into the call of John the Baptist in Luke, may we hear once again that all are welcome, that all are invited to this table of grace and to this home called Grace United Methodist Church. As we prepare to do so today, let us pray...

Christmas is seven days closer. The second candle has been lit. As I mentioned last week, there is often hope found in the waiting, in keeping our heads up, in slowing down, and in looking for signs of Christ in our loves and in our world. And sometimes it feels like we are in a mad dash towards the finish line, doing all we can to reach December 26. It is easy to slip into this mode – this mode of doing and shopping and “eventing” and being too busy. Time seems to somehow be a bit shorter during these stretches of busyness too, doesn’t it? If this is something that resonates with you, consider coming tonight at 7:00, sitting in the quiet and stillness of the sanctuary, spending time in prayer and rest with God. For me it like a “reset button” that I can press before beginning the week.

I invite you to turn with me to Malachi 3 as we look at another reset button that needed to be hit. Malachi is the last prophet to speak the word of God in the Old Testament. After this book in our Bibles, God goes silent for about 400 years. In the first two chapters of Malachi, God details the heavenly case against the people of Israel and against the priests. The Levites have been unfaithful and disobedient. They have led the people astray. They have set a poor example, allowing the people to offer blemished animals on the altar of God. Also breaking the Law, the priests allowed the people to intermarry with the pagans around them. To those who are not walking in the ways of the Lord, Malachi speaks the word of God. The word told them there was some cleaning up to be done.

In verse one we read, *"See, 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."

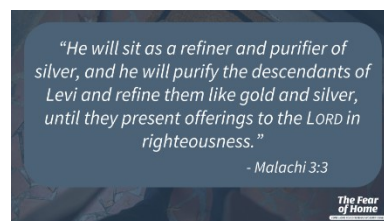
These words of warning also are words of hope. Malachi is calling the backsliding people and the disobedient religious leaders to renew their spiritual practices, to repent, and to return to faithful and obedient living.

Do you remember when you were little and had to clean your room? For me it always seemed to come up when I wanted to go outside to play. I would ask about going outside to play football or to ride bikes or whatever and my Mom would ask if my room were clean. She was smart. She knew that I was motivated to do something and could leverage that to have me clean up my room. I think I almost always said it was clean. She would say she was going to check. I'd realize I'd better buzz up the steps to do a quick clean before she got there. Dirty clothes kicked under the bed, dirty dishes slipped into a dresser drawer, covers quickly put sort of in place. But she knew all the tricks. In spite of my protests or my begging to do it later, there was work to be done and the time was always now. Does this scenario sound familiar? I'd usually give in and at least do a decent job of cleaning my room. But for some families it can be quite the battle. It can even turn a little ugly. Tempers and voices can rise. If this were the norm, then maybe going home isn't something so positive.

The temple system and the priests that administered it, well, they too needed a good cleaning. But the days will pass, time will move on. And then, *"suddenly,"* Christ will be walking inside the temple walls.

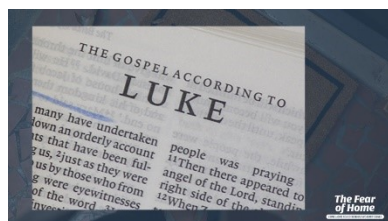
And he will turn over tables and drive out the money changers. There will be a serious house cleaning. Yes, the day is coming when justice and righteousness will reign. One day.

Continuing on in Malachi we read, *"But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?"* The priests, the religious leaders, they will be taken off guard as Jesus explodes upon the scene that the temple has become – a *"den of robbers"* as Jesus put it. Just as Jesus' righteousness made the religious leaders of his day squirm, so too do the Levites squirm a bit when Malachi proclaims God's judgment upon them and their behavior. Hear again the judgment in verse three: *"He 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."* God is intentional in choosing silver. Why not gold? It is more valuable.



Silver is harder to refine than gold. Silver takes longer to refine than gold. To refine silver is a long-term, more hands-on process. The one tending the silver has to stay close and often gets burned. The silver has to be watched, tended to. Refining silver is not easy and it is not quick. Here we find the word of hope. God is not done with the priests or with Israel. God is willing to take the long road, to walk with them throughout the process of refining, of cleaning up the house of the Lord. In fact, God will stick it out, refining and refining them until *"they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness."* God will endure the fire so that the people can be made whole again. God incarnate, Jesus Christ, will walk through the trial, going to the cross so that we can be refined over and over.

That is part of what we practice when we gather around this table to celebrate Holy Communion each first Sunday. Here, at the table of grace, we are being refined over and over.



Turn with me now to Luke 3. Luke was the gospel writer that set out to *"write an orderly account for you."*

That is why Luke the physician and historian often includes lists of names and places in his gospel. Our passage begins by clarifying who was ruling when and where and who the religious leaders were. Luke was a Gentile. He was not steeped in the history and traditions of the Jewish faith. He wrote to other Gentiles, so he felt it necessary to ground his story of the good news in real world things, in the actual facts of the day. But there is more to it than that.

When Luke says, *"In 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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas" he is doing more than listing historical information. Luke, like Matthew, Mark, and John, were theologians more than anything else. Their primary mission and purpose was to teach their readers about God and the season that God was incarnate in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. So, why the list, theologically speaking?

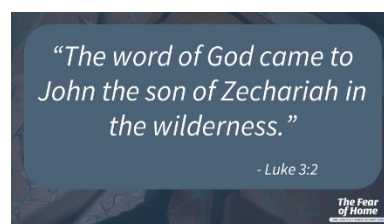
"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas..."

- Luke 3: 1-2

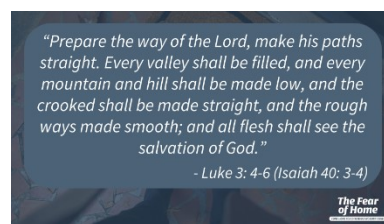
The Fear of Home

These men were men of power. All six – emperors, governors, rulers, high priests – all six were powerful men who held the reigns of government and religion. They set the course of history. They determined what was a priority. They decided how the faith of the people would be understood and lived out. All six were important men. Wouldn't Annas or Caiaphas be the ones to lead the people back to God, to begin the cleansing of the temple and the renewing of the spirituality of Israel?

Well, maybe if they were not part of the problem. Instead of God picking one of the team, one of the chief priests to begin this good work, look what God does in verse two: *"The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."* Instead of picking one of these powerful men, God chooses John. God chose a nobody living out in the middle of nowhere to begin this reclamation process. Receiving the word of God, we read that John *"went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."* John the Baptist did not show up in the temple, taking on the religious leaders. He began a grass-roots movement. Foreshadowing the ministry that Jesus would lead, John went to the people, to where they were at, and spoke God's word to them.



Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, Luke declares John's mission: *"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*



There is work to be done. Home must be made ready. Hearts must be refined and prepared for the coming of the Lord.

John the Baptist says make way, straighten the highway, fill in the potholes, smooth out the bumps! There is work to be done here: getting-ready work, opening-up work, pulling in the kinks work. As ministers to our neighbors and families, as ministers to one another here in the church, what does this work look like? What does it look like to prepare the way, to make a way for the Lord? And as ministers to those who fear the church or who see the church in a negative light, what does it mean to prepare the way, to help make a way, to straighten the highway? As we close today, let us wrestle with the answers to these two very different questions.

For Luke's audience, the ideas of clearing the road, making the path straight and level, would have invoked the ancient practice of preparing the road for the approach of a king. Today we would say we are "rolling out the red carpet" – maybe for a celebrity or for another person of importance. In a practical way we do this in our churches as we ready them for the Advent season. We set up the tree, the table for the Advent candles, and the manger. We decorate the windowsills with small mangers, and we add extra light with the luminaries. In worship we set aside time each Sunday to light candles that help us to remember the hope, peace, joy, and love that seems to permeate this time of year. We sing special hymns and songs during this time of year, each reminding us of different aspects of the Christ story. These are all signs and symbols that draw us back home, back to the roots of our faith.

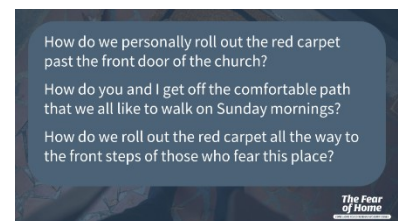
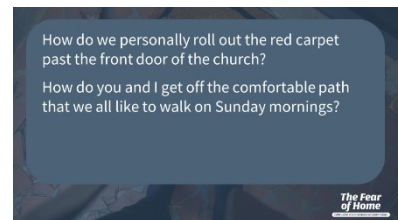
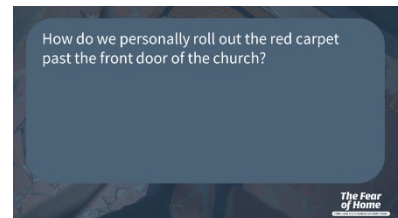
These insider practices also extend the feelings of welcome and hospitality, helping nominal believers and even those who do not have a positive relationship with the church to feel welcomed, to feel like they can belong, at least for a Sunday or a Christmas Eve.

Is all of that, all of this enough? Does decorating the church and singing Christmas music and lighting candles make the way, prepare the way for those who fear coming home to a place that they do not know or to a place that they distrust or have had negative experiences with? We all know people who fit into one of these categories.



So, the questions for each of us to take with us this morning are these three:

- ✝ How do we personally roll out the red carpet past the front door of the church?
- ✝ How do you and I get off the comfortable path that we all like to walk on Sunday mornings?
- ✝ How do we roll out the red carpet all the way to the front steps of those who fear this place?



Here is my hope and prayer as we close this time together: It is that we each take these challenging questions out the door with us and that we take some time to consider who God might lead us to in the days and weeks ahead. Who is it that you or I know that needs just a little encouragement, just a little assurance, just a little invitation? May the Holy Spirit lead and guide us as we seek to lessen the fear of home, helping another to draw closer to Christ this Advent season. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When have you “rolled out the red carpet” for one who did not yet know Jesus or who had a fear of church? If you have not done this, whom will you commit to bringing “home” on Christmas Eve?
- 2) *Pray*. Who is God placing upon your heart this Advent season? Who is it among the least, lost, or broken that is God calling you to reach out to?
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 8: 26-39. How has Jesus healed you? How do you live out verse 39?