

Malachi 3:1-4

Look, I am sending my messenger who will clear the path before me;  
suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to his temple.  
The messenger of the covenant in whom you take delight is coming,  
says the Lord of heavenly forces.  
2 Who can endure the day of his coming?  
Who can withstand his appearance?  
He is like the refiner's fire or the cleaner's soap.  
3 He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver.  
He will purify the Levites  
and refine them like gold and silver.  
They will belong to the Lord,  
presenting a righteous offering.  
4 The offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord  
as in ancient days and in former years.

Luke 1:68-79

68 "Bless the Lord God of Israel  
because he has come to help and has delivered his people.  
69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house,  
70 just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago.  
71 He has brought salvation from our enemies  
and from the power of all those who hate us.  
72 He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and remembered his holy covenant,  
73 the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham. He has granted  
74 that we would be rescued  
from the power of our enemies  
so that we could serve him without fear,  
75 in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes,  
for as long as we live.  
76 You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.  
77 You will tell his people how to be saved  
through the forgiveness of their sins.  
78 Because of our God's deep compassion,  
the dawn from heaven will break upon us,  
79 to give light to those who are sitting in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide us on the path of peace."

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler[a] over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler[b] over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler[c] over Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God's word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God

to forgive their sins. 4 This is just as it was written in the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

A voice crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way for the Lord;  
make his paths straight.

5 Every valley will be filled,  
and every mountain and hill will be leveled.

The crooked will be made straight  
and the rough places made smooth.

6 All humanity will see God's salvation.”[d]

## **Sermon**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

We're now into the second week of our Advent wait. Some more candles brighten the sanctuary. A few more decorations appear, including a tree. We're closer to Christmas, but surely not yet there. So, we turn once again to our theme. Why We Wait: Hopes and Behaviors of Advent. Last week we spoke of anticipation, of the ways God's fostered a hopeful expectation within us for faithfulness and a preparation for that faithfulness, and you can read and hear that sermon on our website.

This morning, we turn to another theme, one clearly spoken of in each of today's readings, transformation. Transformation is the preparation God calls us to within our Advent wait. Not just baking treats or decking halls, but

actual, functional, substantial change within our lives and our world.

At one level, we deeply yearn for transformation. Last week in our Discipleship group, we wondered aloud why God had yet to fully transform the world, why we've waited over 2,000 years for the completion of God's Kingdom. One amongst you said it this way: In light of all the suffering in the world, what's God waiting for?

Even more than transformation of the world, beyond that cosmic scale, we know all too well the need for transformation within our own lives and the lives of those that we love. Some of us know the pains and imperfections within our own bodies all too well, whether just too much weight or chronic aches or signs of dementia or oppressive tumors. We want transformation for our bodies and for those we love as well. We know that brokenness in our relationships, where our families make the Hatfields and

McCoys seem downright friendly, with workplaces panged with anxiety. We know the nagging constancy of depression and anxiety and anorexia and bulimia and self-loathing and a plethora of other plagues that hang on to us like an invasion of ticks, slowly draining us of our lifeblood and never revealing a way out. We want transformation.

Or at least, we say we do. As much as we say we want transformation, when the opportunity presents itself, complacency sets in all too often. We want to see transformation in the world – for instance, an end to hatred and violence – but when given the chance, we respond to hatred with more determined hate, to violence with more effective forms of violence. Or, even though we want to see transformation in our bodies, we choose destructive rather than constructive behaviors. We don't do the physical therapy, or take the medicine, or exercise, or eat the way we ought. We want transformation within our relationships,

but are unwilling to compromise, to make sacrifices, to admit our own wrongs. Sometimes, we are the obstacle to the transformation we want to see in the world and in our own lives.

At other times, though, we're threatened by things well beyond our control. The lung cancer caused by asbestos mass marketed by corporations and unwittingly used by almost everyone. The depression and chemical imbalance caused by an almost indiscernible combination of factors. The self-loathing caused by a culture that constantly tells us we're not good enough. Sometimes, the obstacle to the transformation we want to see is far beyond our own control.

That's part of the difficulty with religious language around transformation. We confuse what we can change and can't. Worse, sometimes we use the excuse of things that we can't change to avoid the responsibility of the

things that we can change. Surely, there are some things in this world that only God will change. The pervasive and chronic illnesses beyond our control, the natural disasters beyond our control, the chemical imbalances in our own bodies beyond our control, only God will transform those things, and in Advent, we wait for that promise to come to fruition in Jesus Christ. A time is coming when those things will no longer plague our lives, and so we await God's work to transform those things.

Yet, while we wait for God to cure those ills, God also calls us to prepare the way of the Lord, to make the paths straight. When we read today's passages, our first thoughts go to John the Baptist, and rightly so! He was the first to prepare the way for Jesus' entrance into the world. But God never intended John to be the last. You and I not just waiting on a refining fire or a cleansing soap. We are called to be the furnace that burns away the impurities we can

affect and brings out the gold we desire to see. We are called to be the detergent that washes away the stains we can resolve and produce garments that shine God's image within our communities. In other words, we're called to be transformed by God and be God's agents of transformation in the world right now. That's how we prepare the way of the Lord, by affecting transformation.

And that's hard, a big and difficult responsibility. But what if I told you that this is transformation born of God's compassion? Yes, even the transformation that requires us to change our behaviors? As Zechariah says in Luke, "Because of our God's deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace." God calls us to the work of transformation, to change the things that we can in the world as an act of compassion in the midst of Advent. At

the same time, God promises transformation of the things that we can't change, and that is what we wait for amidst advent. We're called to anticipate God's work to change the world by working for the changes God places before us.

Y'all should know something about me. Some Sundays the Gospel really irks me, gets under my skin, frustrates me. If it were up to me, I'd stand up here weekly, talk about forgiveness and joy, tell jokes and good stories, and not dwell in the mess of the world, not constantly face in the tragedies that plague our people, not continually confront the evils that cause so much death in our world, not once again speak of our responsibility as people of faith to become a part of the change for goodness, for justice, for peace.

But the story of Christmas is that God chose to come and dwell in the midst of our mess, to face the tragedies that plague us alongside us, to confront the evils that lead

to the death. We wait for a God who didn't ignore the bad in the world, but confronted it head on, faced sin with holiness, faced violence with peace. As the Body of Christ, the people gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, we're called to confront the things that lead to death in our world as well. Jesus comes to restore us to life eternal, to abundant life. That's God's work. Our work is to ensure that all may experience that life, may meet the God who comes in a manger and rises from a tomb.

So, as a church, we can't ignore the shootings in San Bernardino this week. As a pastor, I can't stay silent on the continual cycle of violence that plagues our country, our people. We need to work to end these injustices, this violence. Zechariah tells us that, in God's compassion, Jesus comes to guide us on the path of peace. The path of peace? I haven't seen much of that path lately, and often I feel quite helpless to face this, to address this. But if we think

we're helpless to make a difference, then we confuse what we can change and can't, or perhaps we use the excuse of things that we can't change to avoid the responsibility of the things that we can change. To paraphrase Shane Claiborne, whose book we're reading for our Advent book discussion, we're responsible for the violence in the world, which also means we're able to and responsible to work for peace as well. We, as the people of God, have the ability not just through prayer, but through radical action, to help reshape our country into a place that is both inclusive of the most vulnerable people in the world, such as refugees fleeing ISIS, while at the same time much safer from the threats of gun violence.

What we're called to as children of the Lord is to prepare the way of the Lord. We're called to actively work for peace as we await the Prince of Peace. We're called to forsake violence as friends of Jesus, who faced his own

crucifixion nonviolently. We're called to feed the hungry as Jesus fed thousands over and over again. We're called to give to those who ask because, when we ask for forgiveness, Jesus always gives that most wondrous of gifts. Perhaps most of all, we're called to love our neighbors as ourselves, which means we're called to love people second only to God, which means we're called to love people more than our traditions or rights or money or guns, or our constitutional rights to any of those things. There's no way to prepare the way of the Lord of Love if we refuse to love the image of God more than the idols in our lives. As Christians, the life of God and the life of people must take precedence over all these things, over ourselves.

The transformation we need most in this Advent wait is to truly embrace the greatest commandment. To love God with all that we have, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. There's no command, no law, greater than these.

The command to love supersedes everything, and we must begin to live this way, to act this way, to help become the change we wait for in Christmas. In Christmas, God promises to bring change we can't accomplish, but in Advent, God calls us to begin the change that we want to see in the world. That's the hope and action we have before us. We follow in John the Baptist's footsteps. We become a cleansing soap of peace. We become a refining fire of love. That's how we prepare the way of the Lord. Amen.

Why We Wait: Hopes and Behaviors of Advent

Weekly Themes

Week 1 – Anticipation (Waiting with Purpose – Jeremiah 33)

Week 2 – Transformation (Anticipating Change – Malachi 3)

Week 3 – Restoration (Transformation to God's Purposes – Zephaniah 3)

Week 4 – Redemption (Restoration to Value – Micah 5)