

“Prepare”  
Malachi 3:1-4,  
Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6

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What are you prepared for? Are you prepared for Christmas? It is a time of preparation. I think about all the college students who are preparing for their finals, teachers preparing to get the grades done as quickly as possible. All kinds of preparation.

Throughout our lives we tend to do different kinds of preparation. We prepare for things we think we will do, and once we are prepared and we do it for a while, it's kind of nice to be prepared and able to do something. In fact, it's so good that sometimes when I get to the point where I'm prepared for something, I'm going to make sure it happens because I'm prepared for it. I think about that, how my preparation shapes what I want to have happen.

Back in 1943, Thomas Watson, the Chair of IBM, said he thought there would be a need in the world for five computers, and they were prepared to make those five. He was prepared for a particular way of doing things and seeing things. He wasn't necessarily prepared for what happened. We all know what happened. There are a few more than five computers around.

In some ways what John was doing in the wilderness in saying, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” was coming into a culture that had prepared a particular way of dealing with God. They were prepared to deal with God through the Temple. It was the way they dealt with God. The people who ran the Temple were pretty sure it was absolutely THE way to come to God, to deal with God. Perhaps that's why John comes out of the wilderness and not out of the Temple. He comes and invites people to prepare the way. Repentance means to turn around. He's asking them to prepare to do something new and different. If we look at the entire story, we can see what happens. He comes and tells people to prepare the way, Jesus comes to show the way, the Temple gets destroyed, and now we have a way to address God directly through Jesus Christ, with a faith that is nurtured and supported in community. No Temple needed.

We can see what happened as John called those Judeans to prepare the way, Jesus showed the way, and the change that happened, historically for them, and for us. And yet it is the story that continues to be our story. As we hear John say, “Prepare the way,” it makes me wonder, what Temple do I have in the way? What am I so prepared to do that I won't see what

God might be doing. It's amazing how many times God surprises us with how God does things. A baby in a manger? A carpenter? It was a surprising way of coming to us, and yet through that surprise we are given such opportunity, such gifts and grace, goodness. Prepare the way.

It's interesting to me, when I look at that bit of prophecy, how it starts with Isaiah calling out to the people of his day to prepare the way. It's talked about as John called out to his people to prepare the way. And how it still speaks to us today to prepare the way of God. What is it to prepare the way?

Sometimes I get a little confused because it looks to me like, as I read on, that I'm supposed to fill valleys and tear down mountains, to make crooked ways straight and rough places plain. But if you notice, there's a shift in tense. He calls us to prepare the way, and those other things shall happen. They will happen. It's not all on our shoulders to make it all happen, but our preparation of the way is to open ourselves to God. We can put stuff on the tracks. We can try to make sure God can't find us. We can try to make the way to us as crooked as possible, but we're invited to see what might be in the way. We are reminded that what's in the way we can open up, we can push aside. There's some of our stuff that we can say it's there, but I want to look to God. I want to look beyond. I want to open myself.

As I was thinking about it, I recognize oftentimes it is my mind that closes me down. I think, "That's not possible." I close myself off from the very possibilities of what God might do in my life, and when I close my mind I think I close my heart as well, or that my heart becomes closed in. If I can just open my heart, open my life, open myself to possibility, even if I can't understand it. So often, I'm not sure I know what the Temple is in my life that is standing in the way, but I'm sure I've got some. What I think is possible is to say, "Lord, in spite of those Temples, let me open up. Let me hear again the word of wonder, the grace you give, the hope you share. Let me look ahead and see a bit of where you want to take us."

I think that's what the Philippians verse helps us see – to look ahead and recognize where God wants to take us. We have that advantage of looking back on Jesus coming into our world. We know that God is working to take us forward and that we can prepare for that. We can see what we do and what the things are in our lives that we line up. What Paul helps me see in Philippians is that if I'm lining things up and there's not an overflowing of love in them, than I might actually be closing myself off from God. Paul is talking to the Philippians about the way they can be God's

people. It's his prayer for them. He says, "Let love overflow, more and more in your knowledge and insight, in the way you're experiencing and understanding and beginning to see the world and how you're letting the Spirit move you to discern what is right." It's as I look at my life and ask, "Is there love that's part of that particular thing I'm doing?"

I remember when I was working in a commercial laboratory in Berkeley, California—a little laboratory where we did various kinds of analysis—and I was helping with some of the scheduling and running of it. I recognized for us to make the most money for that little laboratory, we needed to be running around the clock, to have somebody there all the time working those instruments. We also were not in the best part of Berkeley. It was a place where it would have been dangerous for our people to stay, and there would have been very few there at night. Now, if all I thought about was making money for that little laboratory, I don't see the love as part of that.

There's a way in which when I look at what is important to me and ask if there's love, is there love overflowing into what I do, who I am, what I'm about, it might give me a clue to what Temples are in the way. It might help me recognize how I'm keeping my heart closed off from God.

It's our invitation, in this time of year particularly, to prepare, to see that we can open up to God. Surely most of us have recognized that in some way already, but this is a time when we think again, do I have Temples in the way? Can I hear again the encouragement to prepare for God coming again into my life? Can I see the way the Spirit is at work allowing love to overflow? And so we are invited, invited to see how we might prepare and notice that as we let God in, God is the one who will fill the valleys and bring down the mountains and make the crooked way straight between us and God, that we might have a harvest of righteousness, as Paul puts it. A harvest of right relationships.

Isn't that really what the table is about? God inviting us to have prepared our hearts, to open up to him and to come and to recognize that he gathers us around the table? That's the harvest of righteousness. That's being part of a family of faith, right relationships together around the one who brings grace, who brings goodness. We are invited to prepare the way of the Lord. Amen.