

“Preparation Peace”

Philippians 1:3-6; Luke 1:68-79

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In the introductory meeting of the Advent study that began last Sunday afternoon... for which there are STILL plenty of good seats available later today 😊... the question was posed, “What one word (or, ‘few words’... after all, we ARE Presbyterian!) would you use to describe what Advent means?” And of the many good responses, there was one more popular choice that should come as no surprise: **“Prepare.”** How the ancient world ‘prepared’ for the first coming of the Messiah, Jesus. How our modern world is called to ‘prepare’ for His second coming to ‘judge both the quick and the dead.’ And how, in the meantime, both believer and non-believer alike should be mindful of how they are ‘prepared’ for the time when they will meet their Maker. And what part Jesus Christ plays in that ‘preparation’...

As I thought about all that goes into our spiritual ‘preparation’ to meet a holy God ‘face-to-face,’ I was reminded about the ways we prepare to meet some of God’s ‘not-so-holy’ creation. Our friends and family that have already, or will be soon, making their own ‘advent’ into our lives... at Thanksgiving or Christmas. I don’t think I have to remind many of you of all the EFFORT that goes into ‘preparing’ for the holidays, and those ‘attendant’ visitors that we will welcome into our homes. Between all of the cleaning of homes, decorating inside and out, buying gifts and groceries, the preparing of foods both to consume and give away, and the time and energy to drive around in holiday traffic to facilitate all of these, the holidays can be downright STRESSFUL. AMEN? And that’s not even taking into consideration all of the other regular duties of being ‘caregivers’ for ‘children’ both young and old. And oh yes, that four-letter word many of us still have to deal with: ‘W-O-R-K.’

The funny thing is, I would hazard to say that for any of us who are the beneficiaries of going over to someone else’s home for a holiday event, we would most certainly NOT want our friend or family member to BE ‘stressed out.’ That what matters most is NOT how nice the house looks, or how pretty the tree is, or how good the food tastes. What matters most is not the ‘stuff’ (or ‘stuff-ing’) of gathering together. But rather, another ‘four-letter word’: L-O-V-E. MUCH more than the ‘perspiration’ associated with preparing for the ‘advent’ of our loved ones, we should appreciate the ‘inspiration’ we receive by being with those whom we love. Proper

Preparation IS important... but it HAS to be not so much about WHAT you are having to do... but WHO you are doing it for.

Besides the word 'prepare,' there is another word that is closely associated with the season of Advent: John. The Baptist, that is. And for Him, that 'preparation' was related to the need for another 'hard labor' on the part of the people: REPENTANCE. Not just 'cleaning a house,' but 'cleansing our SOULS.' The importance of repentance, of turning from our sins, in order to turn TO Jesus, was a BIG part of the identity of John. And if we think that the prospects of preparing our homes for earthly visitors is onerous, this doesn't hold a candle to the daunting task of preparing our hearts for a Divine visitor. The 'baptism of repentance' preached by John was serious business.

But just as our preparation for our friends and family must not take away from the ultimate goal of being with them, so too must our personal preparation for the coming of Jesus into our world and hearts not take away from our ultimate goal of being with Him... both in this world and in the world to come. Just as our Heavenly Father knew that the overarching message of His Son was that of unconditional LOVE, so too did the earthly father of John know that his son bore an ultimate message not of judgment, but of a LOVE that would conquer death. A LOVE that will give us, in the ways we get ready for His arrival, a **"Preparation Peace."**

In considering the '**preparation**' that you and I must do to make ourselves 'ready' for Christ's coming... that 'turning' that John exhorts us sinners to do... let us experience **peace** in that we, for one, **"Know the Favor"** of God. In the opening words of Zechariah, *"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.... Has raised up a mighty savior for us ... that we would be saved from our enemies..."* (Luke 1:68-71)

How comforting it is to know that in spite of all the ways we fail to do God's will for our lives and His world... no matter how much we may disappoint Him... he yet cares for us enough to SAVE us. Not to the degree in which we succeed or fail to prepare for the coming of Jesus. Not by the great heritage we have in the church, or how many Bible studies we attend, or how much we give in service to others. Not by anything we can DO. But rather, who we ARE. His beloved, *favoured* children. We are saved from our enemies...physical, mental, emotional, spiritual... not because of WHO we are... but WHOSE we are.

When we ask someone to do us a 'favor,' it will usually be someone with whom we have a close relationship. Someone we trust, can be open with. Someone we believe cares enough about us to do something we wouldn't just ask ANYBODY to do. Which is EXACTLY the type of relationship we are to have with God. The God we can trust, be open with, knowing that he cares.

How can we 'KNOW the Favor' of God is with us? Perhaps the Word, as expressed through John, says it best; I invite you to read this more personal version along with me: ***"For God so loved the world... ME... that he gave his only begotten Son. That if I believe in him, I will NOT perish, but have everlasting life."*** (John 3:16) Know God's Favor. Know God's Love. Know God's Peace.

Second, because we know how much God favors us, loves us, and wishes us peace in our preparation, we should have **"NO FEAR."** In further words of Zechariah, he says that ***"We, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days."*** (Luke 1:74-75) Confident of the LOVE that saves us in spite of ourselves, we SHOULD be able to live by those words of Philippians: ***"Be anxious (fearful) for nothing..."*** But how well does that work for us? You may be familiar with a popular quote, **"Let your FAITH be bigger than your FEAR."** That is not always so easy, is it...?

A week ago Saturday I was coming back to LC from BR, having dropped off Barrie there in order to hurriedly get back here to finish prep for Sunday's service. I stopped at my favorite gas station at Super 1 Foods in Scott. After getting some fuel for my car's gas tank as well as for my own personal one at the store, I rushed to get back on the interstate... only to realize that the credit card Barrie had given me to use was missing. Feeling just a little 'fearful'... my mind racing as to where it could be... I got off and searched the car. To no avail, I headed back to Scott. Retracing all my steps, I went by the gas pumps, and through the store, including asking the customer service person if, ha ha, anyone had turned it in. Battling thoughts about all that I would have to do in reporting it missing, hoping that any charges wouldn't be TOO big (after all, 'TIS the season), I walked back to the place where I had parked the first time, hoping against hope to find it. And there, staring up at me from the ground, right between two vehicles, was the

wayward card, 'looking' at me as if to say, 'Here I am! Come and get me!' 'what once was lost, now was found.' My own little 'Christmas miracle'...

And as I secured that little piece of plastic in my wallet, I smiled and lifted up my thanks to God. And I recalled those words that Jesus said to those 'lost' ones that He had 'found': ***"Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. So do not let your hearts be troubled. And do not fear."*** (John 14:27)

Finally, as we Know God's Favor, and should 'know NO Fear,' finally we are to **SHOW FORGIVENESS**. God's "Preparation Peace" flows from God, through US, to OTHERS. The words that Zechariah might likely have been using to describe his son also applies to us: ***"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins."*** (Lk 1:76-77)

It has been said that at the very heart of the Gospel... in the very heart of Jesus Christ... lies **forgiveness**. That there is not better way that we can serve as a witness to the truth of the Christian faith than forgiving one another. Jesus also makes it 'crystal clear' just how important OUR forgiveness of others is to our OWN forgiveness by God: ***"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*** (Matthew 6:14-15) This is shared by all four Gospels... it IS the 'Gospel truth,' if you will.

Aside from this eternal perspective, is a practical earthly one. If we do not forgive others their sins against us (or, for that matter, our sin against them) that grudge/guilt is a poison, that does more damage to us than to them. Jesus says that even before we leave our offering at the altar, before we can truly worship Him in spirit and truth, we must go and make amends with our sister or brother. In so doing, we prepare the way for the Lord. Bringing peace without...and within.

This season of Advent... this holy time to PREPARE... may we remember that it is not just about "Living OUT the **Preparation**"...but "Loving ON the **Person**." Love on **Jesus**... Love on **Others**... Love on **Yourself**. (J.O.Y.) And speaking of 'joy,' I would leave you with the words of Paul to his beloved sisters and brothers in Philippi... ones that could also be said by Jesus to you and me:

“I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” (1:3-6)

As we all continue to ‘prepare’ ourselves for that blessed day of ‘completion’ in Jesus Christ, may He do as John’s Dad said: ***“guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:79)***

Questions for Reflection: The prophet Malachi says that God is “like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap” (Mal. 3:2). Reflect on events of the past year. How has God been working to refine and purify your life or your community of faith?

Paul writes to the church at Philippi: “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil.1:3–5). Think about people in your life for whom you give thanks, who have been in your prayers, and who have brought good news and joy to you this year. Consider writing them a letter or card to express your gratitude.