

PREPARED FOR THE JOURNEY

Malachi 3:1-4; 4:5-6, OT p. 889
Luke 1:11-17; 68-79, NT p. 56
Luke 3:2-7, NT p. 60

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2nd Sunday of Advent
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I wasn't ready for a hike. It was my first full day in Glacier National Park. I drove up to the Logan Pass visitor center, to get an overview of the hiking trails and plan the next six days. There is a boardwalk behind the visitor center, winding up the hill. Or at least it looks like a hill, but at 6000 ft, I was already high in the mountains. I started up the path to the boardwalk. I had on regular shoes, not my hiking boots. I think I had my hat and sunglasses, but no water or snacks, and the hiking stick was safe in the trunk of the car. The wild flowers were still looking good, even in August, because the snow hadn't been gone for long. It was a beautiful morning, so I just kept hiking up that boardwalk with its steps (built by a team of giants, I'm sure). I was huffing and puffing all the way. Finally at a little waterfall, I stopped, enjoyed the scenery, turned around and headed back down. A lot of people were headed up the trail. "Did you get to the lake?" more than one person asked. "What lake? Is there a lake?" I began to realize I had missed something important, because I wasn't prepared for that hike. I vowed not to let that happen again.

Going on a hike or a longer journey requires us to make some decisions. What should we take? What should we leave behind? What route will we take, and how will we find the right path? Today's readings are full of good advice about how to prepare for what God is about to do. They're full of good words, groups of good words: turn, return, repent; save, Savior, salvation; mercy, forgiveness, guidance. If we take the advice of the prophet Malachai, the angel in the temple and the baptizer by the river, we will be a

people prepared for the Lord.

First, **turn and repent**. The prophet Malachi promised a return of Elijah, or someone like Elijah, who would turn the hearts of parents toward their children, and the hearts of children toward their parents. The angel told Zechariah that God would use his son John to do the same work of reconciliation, not just within families but reconciliation between Israel and the Lord. When John grew up, his message in the wilderness called the people to a baptism of repentance. To repent is to turn around, change your mind. As we move through Advent toward the celebration of Christmas, the prophet, the angel, the baptizer all call us to turn from our old ways and turn toward God and toward one another, so that we will be ready for what God is about to do. **Turn** is a good Advent word.

Another set of words is **save, salvation, Savior**. The Messiah will come to save, or rescue us from our enemies – that was the expectation as Israel suffered under first one and then another of the world’s superpowers – Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The Messiah would bring political, military, economic and social salvation. The people would be safe. They would have enough and be able to live in peace. We have spiritualized and individualized the word salvation to the point where we’ve lost the sense of that larger salvation that reflects the justice and peace of God. In the life of Jesus, we see both kinds of salvation – physical this-life rescue from disease and hunger, and spiritual new-life reconciliation with God. **Salvation** is a good Advent word.

Of course it’s related to God’s **mercy, forgiveness and daily guidance** into ways of peace. What we’ll hear as we read through Luke this next year is that God’s mercy is for everyone, not just for the people of Israel. Whoever is last and least, whoever has

traditionally been on the outside looking in, whoever is not up to the usual standards of behavior – those are the people who are welcomed by Jesus. God’s forgiving mercy is for all. **Forgiveness** is a good Advent word.

Turn toward God. Expect God’s salvation. Receive God’s mercy. These are ways to prepare for the journey of faith, the way of the Lord. That is the purpose of Advent. That’s not the usual message of the world around us. But if we mean to be faithful Christians, if we intend to follow the teachings of Jesus, if we want to love God with all that we are and our neighbors too – then we will use at least some of our time this month to prepare ourselves spiritually for the celebration of the birth of Jesus and for what God will make happen because of him.

I gave some suggestions last week. Here are a few more. Our first word is **turn**. Turn off the television and the computer and even the cell phone. Turn away from the mall and eBay. Turn toward a beautiful sunrise, toward a candle in an Advent wreath, toward a time of silence. It has taken me a long time to figure what silent prayer really is, and I still am not able to do it for any length of time. I can turn other things off, but my brain doesn’t seem to have the right switch. It goes on its merry way, while I’m trying to get it to be quiet. That’s where a word or short phrase helps. “Peace” or “shalom” or “God is love” or something like that, said in rhythm with my breath is one way I can sometimes turn my brain away from its random thoughts to focus on God’s presence.

We can meditate on Christ as our **Savior**, or we can pray for salvation in the larger sense for those situations where justice is denied and forgiveness seems impossible. We can read stories of mercy even in the newspapers at this time of year, and I hope we can notice those around us who need mercy.

We can receive God's **mercy** for ourselves, as we let go of old mistakes that have come back to haunt us, of old hurts that retain their emotional power. We can know God's mercy and in turn we can forgive one another. One of the purposes of John would be to turn the hearts of children to their parents. We can let God turn our hearts toward those in our families from whom we are estranged. That may be the hardest of all. Sometimes the other person isn't ready for reconciliation, and might even be dangerous. We've certainly heard a lot about that kind of family situation in the news lately. However, to set aside bitterness is part of this turning, and that can lead to spiritual healing, even if we can't be fully reconciled. In our turning, we can rely on the Spirit of God to **guide** us. Zachariah ended his song with these words, "to guide our feet into the way of peace."

To be a people prepared for the Lord, we turn toward the peace of Christ. This isn't a one-time turn, but a continual day-by-day turning, on our Advent journey.

On day six in Glacier National Park, I returned to Logan Pass. By that time I had walked much farther and higher in a ranger-led hike to Grinnell Glacier. I was acclimated to the altitude, and I knew what I needed in my day pack. So that day, I got out the hiking stick, put on my boots, hat and sunglasses, stashed water and lunch and camera and binoculars in my day pack, and headed to the top and then down to the lake. Along the way I saw big horn sheep at a distance and mountain goats actually on the boardwalk. I took the switchbacks down to the lake and ate lunch there. I climbed back up the hill, and that time it felt like a hill, not a mountain, so I was surprised at how quickly I reached the top of the ridge above the visitor center. When you're prepared, the journey isn't so hard. In fact, it's rewarding and even fun.

I hope that is how Advent and Christmas are for all of us this year. It's not so important to do a lot of shopping and baking and cards and entertaining. A year from now, will all of that matter? What is important is our inner preparation, our daily turning toward God, so that we will be prepared for what God will do in us and in our world.

This table is one way we can prepare ourselves. Here we can receive God's mercy and forgiveness. Through this bread of life, we receive strength for the journey, for at this table, Christ meets us as the one who has come and who comes to us still.

Let us pray. Merciful God, you have sent your prophets to prepare the way for Christ. May we also prepare for the new ways in which he will come to us, as Savior and Lord. Amen.