

Second Sunday of Advent

5 December 2021

Scriptures

Old Testament	Malachi 3:1-4
New Testament – Letters	Philippians 1:1-11
New Testament – Gospel	Luke 3:1-6

Theme

Jesus Makes All the Difference – The Preparation

Call to worship

Last Sunday, we looked at the importance of living in expectancy. In this season of Advent, that means living with the sure hope that Jesus has come and will continue to come into our lives, bringing all his grace, peace and presence.

But when you live in expectancy, you must also prepare yourself for Jesus' coming. Today's Bible readings encourage us to make way for Jesus. It's not only about living in hope, but putting skin on that hope. This morning, as we worship let us come before our great God with open hearts and minds, willing to play our part to be ready for Jesus' entry into our lives and world.

Songs

Opening	Joy to the world (SASB 113/87) Be still, for the presence of the Lord (SASB 353/566)
Midway	Refiner's fire (517/805). Note that this song was written out of today's Old Testament reading from Malachi. It is a song of particular relevance as we consider our preparation for Jesus' coming.
Response	Reprise Refiner's fire (517/805). Focus on Jesus knowing us intimately, even better than we know ourselves. He knows what we need to do to be ready for his coming and will help us prepare our hearts. The song focuses on the process of refining and the goal of a pure heart.
Sending Out	I danced in the morning when the world began (SASB 141/737)

Children

Getting Ready

Visual: See photo of an Australian athlete with their Olympic Gold Medal (PPT).

Begin with the question, 'How many of us remember the Tokyo Olympics?' Talk about how good it was to see so many Australians participating, with many winning medals. Have some fun with this. See if people can remember how many gold medals Australia won, and so on. Then talk about how these athletes couldn't just be ready overnight for the Olympic Games, like they were robots and a tech expert programmed them to win. It required serious preparation and training. It's like that in our life with Jesus. Today's Bible readings encourage us to 'prepare the way' for Jesus to come into our lives – to make sure our hearts are ready for him.

Message

Action: Ask people when they can remember investing a lot of time and effort into a project and then seeing a great result. Like last week, have one or two people with a hand-held microphone ready to move among those who want to share. (5 minutes)

Today's Old Testament and New Testament readings both focus on the person we have come to know as 'John the Baptist' and on his message to 'prepare the way for the Lord'. Recognise that although this was a role John the Baptist played to 'prepare the way' for Jesus' mission in the world, his words are directed to all who would hear them.

In 2021, they are directed to us: 'Prepare the way for the Lord' (Luke 3:4). 'Prepare!' It's a powerful challenge. There exist many distractions that can impair our preparation and readiness for Jesus' coming. Someone has said that people living in the 21st century suffer from being 'permanently distracted' – more than the citizens of any other century. Carrying a smartphone in our pocket makes sure of that, for one thing. Social media is a huge distraction. We've also become prolific consumers and have a thing about following celebrities.

But the reality is that human beings have always been prone to distraction because we are first of all prone to avoiding the higher call upon our lives. This is a call to honour God and live a selfless life. If you read the gospels you will quickly note this proneness to distraction in the lives of people who Jesus met. They were so attached to earthly pursuits, pastimes and behaviours that they didn't consider there might be a higher calling on their lives. At least until Jesus broke into their lives, as in the case of the 12 disciples and people like Zacchaeus the tax collector. Even after meeting Jesus it was too hard for some, as in the case of the man we have come to know as 'the rich young ruler'.

Of course, God knows this characteristic about human nature. So, prior to Jesus commencing his ministry he sends John to make a fuss and get our attention. It's also why on the night of Jesus' birth he sent the angelic choir to rouse the shepherds from their shepherding! And it's

why John's words echo across time powerfully to us: 'Prepare!' 'Get ready for Jesus!'

The million-dollar question for us 2000 years on is, 'How do we "prepare the way for the Lord" in our lives?' 'How do I "prepare the way for the Lord" in my life?' And, importantly, 'How do we "prepare the way for the Lord" in our community of faith and in the world at large?'

If you haven't already seen it, there is an obvious answer to these questions that we're going to unpack. John announces in Luke 3:4, 'Prepare the way for the Lord.' And the very next thing he says is: 'Make straight paths for him!' That's the answer. How do we prepare for the Lord's coming? We make straight paths! 'The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth,' reads verse 5.

1. Making straight paths requires honesty

Often our pathways are crooked or complex and it's not easy for Jesus to make his way into our lives – to be birthed in our hearts and be at the centre of our lives. To prepare for Jesus' coming we need to identify and untangle these crooked pathways and make them straight. This requires honesty, with ourselves and others, because all of us have become attached to at least one habit, attitude or a focus of pride, for example, that we don't want to relinquish.

Sometimes we know the paths we need to make straight. At other times we can't see them and we need to spend time doing an audit of our lives, lifestyles and relationships. We know that something in our lives needs our attention, but can't quite pinpoint it. So, we begin to probe, to dig deeper until we see clearly and can make that pathway straight for Jesus to come more fully into our life.

Being honest with ourselves is a far better position to take in a time of preparation than living in denial and trying to cover up our rocky roads.

2. Making straight paths means saying 'no'

Once we can see clearly where our pathways aren't exactly straight, then we can say 'no' to the triggers in our lives that take us down unhelpful paths and into increasingly murky waters. Of course, we could say, 'Well that's me, that's my life, and if you don't like it, too bad!' But that response in itself shows an unhelpful attitude, particularly towards personal development, let alone the development of our relationships with others.

Being followers of Jesus means developing healthy pathways for our lives and relationships. Our goal is to be like Jesus, so we go on a journey of identifying all that hinders this goal and saying no to them. The Apostle Paul's prayer for the Christians living in the Greek city of Philippi is a good guidepost here, describing the kind of pathway we should be on.

Paul writes: 'And this in my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God' (Philippians 1:9-11).

Notice the words Paul uses to describe this pathway: It's first about 'love'. So, we say no to self-interest and personal pride and yes to love and its interests. It's then about 'knowledge and depth of insight'. So, we say no to staying the same and yes to learning and personal growth. It's about 'discerning what is best'. So, we say no to that which is detrimental and destructive in our lives and yes to pathways of health and wholeness that result in us bearing 'the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ'. This is increasingly good fruit that enriches our lives and the lives of those around us – fruit that brings 'glory and praise to God'!

3. Making straight paths takes investment

Being honest and saying no to unhealthy pathways in our lives takes the investment of our time and will. But the good news is that we live in the era of the Holy Spirit. We have a spiritual agent who can help us. So, when we say that making straight paths requires the investment of our time and will it is helpful to recognise that we are not attempting the journey on our own; the Spirit of God is with us.

It is already God's will that we make our paths straight and God will commit all the time in the world to help us so long as we are willing to make our own investment. Our progress is a partnership. We cannot go forward in any other way. It is a mutual investment of time and will – God and us.

This is an investment into what's good for our lives, by mutual consent. God beautifully transforms our lives – with our cooperation. We submit to the 'Refiner's Fire' doing its purifying work, making straight the crooked pathways in our lives, preparing us and setting us apart for Jesus Christ.

In the midst of our busy 21st-century lives, we stop to tend to our souls and the Holy Spirit purges our lives. We make changes to our schedules so we can pursue our own transformation. We consult others who we think can help us. We consult the Word of God. We identify and read the right books or listen to the right podcasts. We actively seek God's guidance. We hang out with people who make positive contributions to our lives and we join a connect group.

Above all we spend time with God in prayer, seeking Him with all our heart. These are the channels through which God can help us make our paths straight and which represent a pure gold investment.

Response

In fact, we're going to sing that song again – Refiner's Fire. Just take a look at the words again, beautifully crafted from Malachi 3:1-4 (PPT):

Purify my heart
Let me be as gold and precious silver
Purify my heart
Let me be as gold, pure gold

*Refiner's fire
My heart's one desire
Is to be holy
Set apart for You, Lord
I choose to be holy
Set apart for You, my Master
Ready to do Your will*

Purify my heart
Cleanse me from within
And make me holy
Purify my heart
Cleanse me from my sin
Deep within

Remember that Jesus makes all the difference in our lives. So, preparing for Jesus coming, submitting to the Refiner's Fire, is the best investment of our lives and futures that we could ever make.