

*This message was delivered by Rev. Pamela Graf Short to the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church on the second Sunday of Advent, December 9, in the year of our LORD two thousand and eighteen. It is based on the following texts:*

**Malachi 3:1-4**

3:1 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight--indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

3:2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap;

3:3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.

3:4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

**Luke 1:68-79**

1:68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

1:69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David,

1:70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

1:71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

1:72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant,

1:73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us

1:74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear,

1:75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

1:76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

1:77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

1:78 By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,

1:79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

### **Philippians 1:3-11**

1:3 I thank my God every time I remember you,

1:4 constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you,

1:5 because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.

1:6 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.

1:7 It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

1:8 For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

1:9 And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight

1:10 to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless,

1:11 having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

### **Luke 3:1-6**

3:1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,

3:2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

3:3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,

3:4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

3:5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;

3:6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

In our Bible stories for today dispatches are sent. Messengers appear.

And God **promises** to scrub God's people clean. It's a fiery cleansing, and so we sometimes miss the part about "tender mercies" and "way of peace".

It seems to start with a bulldozer flattening the land:  
Mountains being torn down and valleys being filled in.  
Or maybe an earthquake instead of dozer.  
I don't know.

I wonder what the people in the ancient world pictured.  
Slaves being whipped as they moved stone by stone;  
or maybe a storm so strong that it washed off the sides of the mountain?  
Maybe it is not about the means, but the end: A highway, a road fit for a king.

Well, we know, and I suspect the ancients also knew that we aren't talking about the literal removal of mountains, but a crumbling of power of the mighty and a filling up of the poor—a political and social shaking of sorts until everyone had enough of what they need.

The message from Isaiah sounds like something *we're* supposed to do.

**Prepare.**

But then again the message from Malachi is all about what **God's** messenger is doing.

That's the way God set things up, isn't it?

It's kind of like God is digging a tunnel from one end and we are digging from the other and somewhere in a stable the two will meet and tender mercy will be born alive.

**Prepare.**

Prepare to be rescued from the hands of your enemies.

What if the highway that we are making for the King is not one formed out in the open for everyone to watch and cheer?

What if it must be hidden so that the enemy does not observe our movements—  
kind of like the Underground Railroad moving slaves

or those in Europe who put their lives at risk and broke laws to move Jews across borders and out of harm's way?

What if we are preparing not for a parade with clowns and pom-poms and Santa in a sleigh?  
but for a rescue?

Zachariah sang

"that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies might serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness before God all our days" (Luke 1:74-75).

**Prepare.**

Prepare to serve.

Patrick Harley was a pastor at our Ottawa church for a time. He would come to our home for Branch of Congregational Life meetings and one day when I thanked him for clearing off the table, instead of saying, "You're Welcome" he said "Happy to serve". "Happy to serve".

What does it look like if we prepare to serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness before God all our days?

I suppose we are getting back to that scrubbing up again, aren't we?

I led a funeral service this week for Carol Whitt. When I met with the family one of the stories they told was how she wanted every one of her children to be prepared to go out somewhere.

Thus, there was always the final inspection.

This inevitably meant that someone had food on their face.

Carol would take her thumb and then some spit and rub and rub and rub their faces till they were red and stinging.

**Prepare.**

We often think that we are rescued so that we can be in happy place; so that we can go to heaven and not feel sad or angry or lonely or greedy or grumpy or afraid ever again.

Now I too am looking forward to paradise where the rivers run clear and the valleys are green and the tears are wiped away, and people from all nations feast together and there is no cancer—Amen? Amen!

Still, according to Zachariah's song,

happiness is not the point of the rescue.

The point of the rescue is *so that* we might serve God without fear in holiness and right living before God all our days.

**Prepare.**

We sometimes think it is tough to follow Jesus,

but think about how tough it was for John the Baptist to precede Jesus;

to go before Jesus and to prepare the road.

To tell people help is on the way! Rescue is near!

How could they hear when the mountains of sin all around them seemed insurmountable

and the valleys of death seemed long and dry and impossible to cross?

How did John the Baptist do it?

How do we do it?

Yes, thanks be to God we live on this side of the incarnation.

Thanks be to God that we know Jesus;

but we live in a world where the mountains of sin stand taunting our youth

and the valleys of death are filled with traps of addictions and violence and scoffing and hatred and greed and fear. Fear shivers in the souls of humanity as Satan smiles.

Don't you see it in your workplace?

The eyes of your co-worker glazed with sadness as though they lived in a cave sealed off from an avalanche of trouble... no light and no way out.

In your neighborhood?

The steps of your neighbor slow and worn with grief walking as though they were in a mire of sludge?

In your schools?

The sound of a locker being slammed shut as an angry shoulder pushes into the crowded hallway.

On Facebook?

Happy pictures on one side and posts of despair on the other.

Don't you hear it on the news and talk radio?

*"Be afraid! Be afraid! Be afraid!"*

There are people all around you who are in need of being rescued;

rescued from valleys scattered with debris of fear and anger.

Rescued from paper mountains of materialism and arrogance.

Rescued from crooked paths of hatred and violence

Rescued from rough places of loneliness and pain.

**Prepare!**

Like John the Baptist prepare the way for them.  
Talk to your coworkers about faith.  
Step with your neighbors walking over rough places in their lives.  
Reach out to the kid who is being bullied.  
Reach out to the bully!

**Prepare!**

Go before the LORD to prepare God's way to give knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sins.  
After all, when you prepare you are making the way for a God who remembers covenants and promises mercy.

Mercy is not about the bubbles.  
It's about the cleansing agents in the soap.

Mercy is not the wispy smoke of a dying fire.  
It's the blaze of a refining flame.

Mercy is not the happy cheers following a birth.  
It is the power of the womb to labor undivided for the sake of a single life.

Mercy is not the lovely colors of the sunrise.  
It is the majesty of the Son that will not stop moving bringing the full light of a new day that breaks through the deepest shadows of our lives;  
a new light that guides us along the hidden road where holiness makes us happy to serve  
and the way of peace gathers us in  
and brings everyone enough of what they need.

**Prepare!**

Now may our God of tender mercies,  
The One who rescues you  
And Gathers you in arms of saving love  
Prepare you in  
Holiness, knowledge,  
forgiveness and light  
And guide you  
into the way of peace.