

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Second Sunday of Advent – Year C

RCL Readings – Malachi 3:1-5; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

ACNA Readings – Malachi 3:1-5; Psalm 126; 1 Corinthians 4:1-21; Luke 3:1-6

Introduction. Advent is not a month-long shopping spree before Christmas. It is the season of the Church to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Unfortunately, our consumer culture has shifted our attention away from the meaning of the season to the expectation of cheap merchandise and good deals. We long to see the sales on Black Friday and Cyber Monday more than we do for a coming Redeemer. Advent is a bit like a mini-Lent during which we prepare for both the celebration of God sending his Son into the world and his soon return, not by focusing on commercialism but rather on extra prayer and giving of gifts to the poor.

Common Theme. The first week of Advent leads us to contemplate the coming judgment. In the second week, we turn to the message of the prophets and John the Baptist with the call to prepare the way of the Lord! The prophetic message is not always an easy one to discern. How do you prepare the way and where do you prepare it? The prophets do not always speak as clearly as we would like, and their message is viewed by some as fanatical and fundamentalist. The question we should be asking is, is the message of the prophets still a relevant one for us today? It should be!

Malachi 3:1-5. In Malachi 2, God has some strong words for the unfaithful people of Judah. The Lord would be justified in responding with immediate judgment. Instead, the prophet declares that God will send a 'messenger'. This messenger, who is sought after or requested by the people, would prepare the way for the Lord to appear suddenly in his temple. God himself was going to come. The verse then indicates a second messenger will also arrive, called the 'messenger of the covenant' who is described differently as desired by the people. Some commentaries conclude that the covenant spoken here is the New Covenant, however, the literal text simply reads 'the covenant'. Either way, whether we think of the Mosaic Covenant or the New Covenant, both are made with the House of Israel to whom the messenger is being sent. While the advent of the Lord is a desired thing, Malachi asks a further rhetorical question: who can endure such a day? It is a wonderful thing to long for the presence of the Lord, but we must know that clean hands and a pure heart are required to stand before him. Thus the arrival of the second messenger involves some refining and cleaning to prepare us for the Lord's presence. In verse 2, we find a rare Hebrew word '*borit*', translated as 'soap'. It has the same consonants as the word for covenant (*brit*). In ancient Israel, soap was formed by using potash or alkaline salts sourced from the Dead Sea, located south of Jerusalem and in the wilderness. Interestingly, Isaiah 40 indicates that the wilderness is from where the messengers will appear. The refining and cleansing will begin with the household of faith, in particular with the Levites, those who should have already been the messengers of the Lord. There are many questions this passage raises for us: do we desire the return of Jesus, do we have clean hands and a pure heart, and are we ready for his judgment?

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Luke 1:68-79 (Canticle 16). This week, instead of a reading from the Psalms, we have a canticle from the New Testament. A canticle is a liturgical song or hymn that is taken from the words of Scripture (except the Psalms as they are already songs). The Book of Common Prayer lists 21 canticles, although there are many more in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Canticles are said or sung in response to readings of Scripture during morning and evening prayer, so it is rare to find them included in the Eucharist service. Canticle 16 is the Holy Spirit-inspired prophetic Song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. In Latin, it is called the *Benedictus* because it begins in a traditional Jewish fashion by blessing the Lord. Zechariah initially focuses on the unborn Jesus and then prophesies about his own newborn, John. As we repeat the words of this canticle, we need to internalize the prophetic truths therein. Do we believe that we are saved from our enemies (v 71)? Do we feel the mercy that God has shown us (v 72)? Are we truly free to worship the Lord without fear (v 74)? Do we understand our salvation and believe we are indeed forgiven (v 77)? If not, then during this Advent season we need to seek the Lord afresh and understand the reality of God's redemption.

Philippians 1:3-11. Paul writes to the community at Philippi and tells them he prays with joy when he remembers them. The joy comes from a partnership that Paul has with the community in sharing the Good News. The partnership is more than the financial support of Paul's ministry. It is also the personal friendship that comes from being brothers and sisters in the Lord. Because of the Philippians, Paul knows he is not alone, that there are many who pray for him and care for his well being. This can be a powerful comfort for those who have left our communities to serve abroad for sake of the Gospel. One of the great enemies of the Good News is loneliness. In his commentary on Philippians, Charles Spurgeon wrote that followers of Jesus are not perfectly perfect in death but will only be wholly perfect at the Second Coming. 'We may be perfect in death, doubtless, as to the moral and spiritual nature; but a man has a body as well as a soul, and it needs both parts to make the perfect man. While the worms are devouring the body the man is not yet perfect. He will be perfect as to his whole manhood when the Lord shall come, and the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible.'¹ Just as God's work in us remains on-going, so the work before us remains undone until Jesus' return. We will need to keep sending and supporting missionaries to all parts of the world. Perhaps in this season of Advent, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas and the coming of the Lord, we should contact those who have gone out from our communities to share the Good News and encourage them with our support.

Luke 3:1-6. John, like the prophets before him, comes to prepare the way. He does so in the wilderness, the place of messianic expectation. The other place of great expectation was the temple; Messiah was going to suddenly appear there. As it is written in Malachi 3:1, 'The Lord, whom you seek, shall suddenly come to his temple'. Later in Luke 3, we see Anna and Simeon are in the temple waiting and

¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "The Pastor's Joy and Confidence," July 13, 1890, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Volume 36, The Spurgeon Library*. Accessed November 26, 2021.
<https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-pastors-joy-and-confidence/>.

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expecting the Messiah. Why is the wilderness so important in the advent of the Messiah? The answer is found in the passage of Isaiah 40 that is quoted in all four Gospels. The Gospel writers all declare John the Baptist to be the voice in the wilderness. However, the Gospel writers are not the only first-century Jewish people to use this passage in a messianic context. Around 150 years prior to Jesus, a group of priests broke off from the temple in Jerusalem and went to the desert around Qumran. They committed themselves to the study of the Scriptures and to preparing for the Messiah. Why go to the desert? There are no punctuation marks, like commas, in Hebrew. So the text in Isaiah reads, 'A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord"'.² Where do you prepare for the Redeemer? In the wilderness! The desert was not the safest place to herald the coming Redeemer. There was no law in the desert; it was a place of danger, bandits, and wild animals. Also, in Jewish tradition it was the abode of demons, yet it is in the darkness where light shines the brightest. John was the voice calling the people to prepare. The call to prepare held an element of warning, both for the individual and for the nation. The way that you prepare for the Messiah is by repenting. Repentance includes the changing of our minds about sin. Our modern culture does not know what sin is. It does not help that large sections of the church have stopped preaching sin and repentance. When we do not believe we have sin in our lives, we do not see the need for a personal redeemer. John takes the role of the voice of one crying 'prepare' and repent. Who are the voices today? We are!

ACNA Readings

Psalm 126. As one of the Songs of Ascent, we can imagine that this psalm was on the lips of many pilgrims as they made their way towards Jerusalem. The first verse reflects back on the time when the Lord brought his people back from Babylon under Ezra and Nehemiah. The expression 'restored the fortunes' can also be applied individually. For example the same expression is used in the case of Job, where the Lord restored the fortunes of Job (Job 42:10). Thus this prayer can be taken personally to celebrate deliverance from individual spiritual captivity. As the pilgrims neared Jerusalem they could rejoice that God had indeed 'done great things for them' on a personal level as well as a national one. This is a great promise for all of us, that our personal tears and sorrows will not be wasted and that a better season awaits us which will fill us with joy. The psalms are also a great source for prophecy, and many psalms are used as proof texts in the New Testament for the life, work, and messiahship of Jesus. Interestingly, the entire psalm is written in the plural form except the last verse which switches to masculine singular. The last verse speaks of an individual who 'goes out and comes back'. Prophetically, this speaks of the two advents of the Messiah. 'He who goes out weeping', describing the traumatic events during his first advent, 'will return with shouts of joy' can be linked to his second advent.

² Cf. KJV translators punctuated differently: 'The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord.'

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1 Corinthians 4:1-21. In his Epistles, Paul uses different words to describe himself in relation to God and to fellow believers. He has called himself a '*doulos*', a slave or servant of God, and an '*apostolos*', an apostle of Jesus in Titus 1:1. Here in 1 Corinthians 4:1, Paul calls himself a '*hyperetas*', which is an even more subordinate slave, and an '*oikonomos*', which is a steward or manager of a household. These are two very different roles and descriptions of status. Even though the steward was also a slave, in relation to the other slaves the steward was their master. Stewards had responsibilities over the other servants and slaves of the house. We are all servants of the Lord. In that way we are all equal, using the gifts, talents and abilities given to us by God for his glory and his service. This does not remove us from hierarchy and authority. There are many things that the world around us can admire, perhaps even applaud about the Church. Our belief in the unity of the household of faith regardless of race, colour and creed might be one. A commitment to the poor and distressed in our society might be another. The Scriptures teach us to submit to God (Jas 4:6-7), to the local authorities (Rom 13:1-7) and to each other (Eph 5:21). Yet when it comes to submitting to Church leadership, many of us struggle. Perhaps it comes from Protestant individualism or perhaps from secular individualism. Paul would remind us that we do have shepherds that exercise authority, and they have responsibilities over us and we have responsibilities towards them. We should endeavour to pray for our pastors and priests, asking the Lord that they would preach the truth as well as to bless them and protect their families. Shepherds of the church should serve the Lord in such a way as to provide us with a model in which to imitate our own service of God. Paul urges the Corinthians to 'imitate me as I imitate Christ'.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.