

**'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.  
Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6**

**What do you do to prepare for Christmas?**

Today is the first Sunday of December. That means that Christmas is coming. What do you normally do to prepare for Christmas? Every year, you may buy a tree and decorate it with ornaments and lights. What else? You may prepare food for a family gathering. And of course, get your shopping done before Christmas. Right? The to-do list for Christmas may already be long, but John the Baptist told us to include one more thing in our to-do list. He said, we must repent!

According to today's scripture, "John went all through the country around the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins." (vs. 3)

Repentance doesn't sound quite fit for Christmas. It may squelch the joyful mood of Christmas. We want to be happy and merry in this season of Christmas and we don't really want to hear about sins and need for repentance. We may want to say "Merry Christmas" but no one likes to say "Repent your sin" to your families and friends when you greet them. Repentance is a better fit for the season of Lent but not Christmas, but John the Baptist reminds us that repentance is the only proper way to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

We must repent and change our hearts to really experience the joy of Christmas. As an immigrant from a non-Christian country, I have often found it interesting that many national holidays in the United States have Christian origins, but they have become secular family holidays. Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter are good examples.

When you think of Thanksgiving, what first comes into your mind? A lavish dinner with roast turkey, cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, family gatherings, Black Friday, Black Friday, and Black Friday. What about Easter? Family dinner, the Easter bunny and chocolate. Then, what about Christmas? Family, gifts, caroling and Boxing Day, which is another big shopping day. Somehow, these days have lost their original meanings. Family, friends, a lavish dinner and gifts... they are great, but we have lost our heart to these good things in the middle of our celebration for Christ's coming. In this way, we have also lost the true meaning of Christmas. We must repent. We must change our hearts first to experience the true joy of Christ's coming.

**Repentance**

Repentance is very simple. To 'repent' means to change... to change our heart toward God from things that have caught our minds. Christmas gifts are good but they're not the main thing about Christmas. Family gatherings are great but again they are not what Christmas is about.

When I was first appointed to my previous church, the church didn't have a Christmas Eve service so I enjoyed a strange, but quiet and relaxing Christmas Eve my first year. The next year, some church members asked me to restart the Christmas Eve service and I was glad for their willingness to celebrate Christ's coming at the church. One concern was that attendance might be low on Christmas Eve because it is a family time and I found myself unconsciously agreeing, but is Christmas really a family day? We all know the answer.

So, take a moment. Stop from your busy Christmas activities and think of the true meaning of Christmas. Don't just drag your Christmas tree from the basement and decorate it. Do it with a sincere heart of remembering and celebrating what God has done for us through

Jesus Christ. Don't just buy gifts to make your family happy, but think of how you can share the joy of Christ's coming with your families and friends through your gifts and delicious dinner. When we do all these things with Christ, we prepare the way of the Lord in our family and community. Without Christ, our Christmas celebration will become a mere family holiday. We must repent. We must change our hearts and change our way of spending time and resources.

The best and proper way to prepare for Christmas is worship. According to the Collins English dictionary, the definition of worship is "If you worship a god, you show your respect to the god, for example, by saying prayers. Another definition was "If you worship someone or something, you **love** them or **admire** them very much." In other words, worship is the most proper way to show our respect and love to Christ. So, this year, I strongly encourage you to join in our Christmas Eve Candlelight Service with your family. It will be a wonderful ecumenical service with our sibling church, Zion Korean UMC. We will celebrate the birth of baby Jesus and worship God for giving his only Son for our redemption. After the candle lighting, we will move to the front yard of the church and sing carols, proclaiming Christ's coming to the world. I know this invitation may make you uncomfortable, disrupting your peaceful family holiday. But didn't the good news of Christ's coming disrupt the palace of King Herod? Didn't the praise of the angels for the birth of Savior disrupt the sleeping shepherds? So, invite your family members to come and feel the true meaning of Christmas. Worship is the first step to disciplining and reorienting our distracted hearts. Repent! Change your heart and love our Christ.

### **Refining silver: God is willing to be with us throughout the process**

Of course, repentance is simple but not easy because it requires change. We can easily find reasons not to come to church on Christmas Eve, while it is hard to find one good reason to move our body from the couch and come to the church. Old habits die hard. Particularly, old bad habits. Therefore, the calling for repentance may come as difficult news during a season when we just want to experience a little Christmas cheer. But God does not leave us alone. God does not want us to take this ongoing journey of transformation alone. In fact, we do not and cannot change our hearts without divine support.

The prophet Malachi says, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me . . . But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" No one is good enough to stand before God. Even though we try our best, we cannot be perfectly pure before God. Do you remember room cleaning day? Your mom said, "clean your room" and your first response to your mother might be, "It's clean enough." Then mom says, "I'm going to check!" And that got a response! It's strange but my room is always clean enough for me but not always clean enough for my mom. If you are moms, you can't understand how your sons survive in their messy rooms. Like this, no one can endure the day of Christ's coming and pass the inspection for cleanliness and purity. But there is still good news, a hidden promise in Malachi's prophesy. He says, "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver."

Purifier of silver! Not gold but silver. Gold gets mentioned later, but the silver is still there. Rev. Dr. Derek Weber points out that silver has important theological meaning. "Silver is harder to refine. Silver takes longer so the purification process is a long-term one. The one who sits to refine silver often gets burned. The one who tends the fire sometimes has to suffer in the

process. You can't leave it in the middle; it has to be watched. It isn't easy, it isn't quick. But it is worth it."<sup>1</sup>

What Malachi says is that God is willing to be with us throughout the process of repentance, purification and sanctification. We do not endure the refiner's fire alone but with God. God is willing to hurt for our salvation, for our purification. God is willing to endure the fire that we might be made whole. We can endure it because God endures with us. This is our hope. This is the very ground of our peace. We are not alone. Emmanuel! God is with us!

So, my Asbury family, during this joyful season of Advent, prepare yourselves for the coming of Christ, our Savior. Offer yourselves to Christ's sacred fire of love that purifies our hearts and souls. Don't be afraid because God endures with us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/come-home-for-christmas/second-sunday-of-advent-year-c-lectionary-planning-notes/second-sunday-of-advent-year-c-preaching-notes>