

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“The Force is Awakening: Prepare”

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Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-6

They were coming over. Cindy and I had been watching television when the phone rang. From the caller ID on the television we knew that it was the previous owners of our house. They wanted to come over. My response was, sure come on ahead. When I hung up Cindy wanted to know what they wanted. Oh they were coming over I replied. Immediately Cindy was up and out of the chair. Miscellaneous shoes were removed from under the coffee table. Books and magazines on top of the table were put away or straightened. The island in our kitchen was cleared of all of the mail that had been left there. Then out came the Swifter duster. Cindy did a quick once over of the sitting area and kitchen. When her preparation was done, she sat back down in front of the television. Almost immediately we saw the headlights turn up the driveway. “They’re here,” she said. I got up, grabbed the package that had been accidentally delivered to our house, met them at the front door, handed them the package. They said thanks and left. If you had asked Cindy and I what the odds were that they would have come in we would have said about a thousand to one. If you had asked us what the odds were that they would come in if Cindy had not prepared, the odds would have been dead even. It didn’t matter though. If someone is coming over, we prepare.

Let me ask then, how many of you live in a home like this? As I thought, lots of you do. Isn’t it an amazing thing what we go through to prepare when people are coming over? I have decided that there are three levels of preparation. The first is when someone is just dropping by, like the former owners of our house. Level one is we straighten up the mess and do just a bit of cleaning. Level two occurs when people are coming for dinner or a party. What happens then is that we not only straighten up the mess but we clean the bathrooms, vacuum and dust so that it appears that this is the way the house looks all the time. Level three is what happens when someone is coming to spend the night. It doesn’t matter if it is our children, our in-laws or our parents. With level three all of the mess has to be dealt with including changing sheets, washing the towels and of course cleaning up all of the mess. And along with all these levels comes stress. We stress about how we will be perceived through the way in which our house looks. Once again then, how many of you have been, are, or will be stressed this holiday because of how you have to prepare? How many of you will stress someone else because you are going to visit them?

What I would like you to do this morning is to take that idea of stressing over preparing and ask yourselves, what would it be like if the one for whom we were preparing was Jesus? I ask because that because both Malachi and John the Baptist were given the assignment of preparing the people of God for the coming of God’s chosen one; of cleaning up the mess the people had made. I will not ask how many of you are familiar with Malachi because even I had to do some research. Malachi was the last of the prophets writing about 400 years before Jesus was born. The mess with which he was faced was that the priests were cheating the people. The priests were taking parts of the sacrifices that were meant for the people as well as not conducting the sacrifices in the prescribed manner. The people as well were a mess. They were not following the appropriate religious practices and were abusing the powerless; widows and

orphans. Malachi then challenges them to prepare for the coming of God's chosen one who would act like a refining fire.

We can see how successful he was in that John the Baptist comes with the same message; the people were to prepare for the coming of the chosen one who would usher in the Kingdom of God. The mess which John faced was both political and religious. We know this because Luke tells us so. The opening words of this reading appear to be a brief historical overview of who is in power. But they are more than that. They are a theological reflection on the mess of the day. There was a political mess because rather than a single king ruling the area there were two kings, a governor and another minor ruler. There was a religious mess because rather than there being one high priest, there are two; Annas and Caiaphas. Now, the reality was that there was only one actual high priest, Caiaphas, but everyone knew that the former high priest Annas actually ran things. He was the man in charge. So it was into this mess that John the Baptist was sent to prepare the people. And the way he did so was to invite people into a ritual in which they confessed that they were part of the mess, and then were baptized in order to be part of the cleanup crew; they were baptized to be part of the solution and not part of the mess. They were not only to be prepared, but they were to be those who helped prepare the world for the coming of the Christ.

In some ways this is what Advent is all about. It is about preparing ourselves for the coming of the chosen one by helping to clean up the mess of the world around us; by becoming part of the solution and not part of the problem. And if there ever was a time when the world is a mess it is right now. We are a political mess with politicians hurling hate everywhere they go at anyone they don't like. We are in a religious mess as the church moves through one of the great transitions in its history, not always knowing which way it ought to go. We are in a cultural mess where society offers us a vision of life that insinuates that our value can only be found in what we own, wear and drive. The world is a mess. But you and I are called to be part of God's clean-up crew as we help prepare the world for the coming of the Kingdom of God. We are to be those, who through demonstrating the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ, draw others into the work in which we are engaged. Understanding that this is not easy, I want to offer you some training material in the form of a prayer; in the form of the prayer of St. Francis. Here it is:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace!
That where there is hatred, I may bring love.
That where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness.
That where there is discord, I may bring harmony.
That where there is error, I may bring truth.
That where there is doubt, I may bring faith.
That where there is despair, I may bring hope.
That where there are shadows, I may bring light.
That where there is sadness, I may bring joy.
Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort, than to be comforted.
To understand, than to be understood.
To love, than to be loved.
For it is by self-forgetting that one finds.
It is by forgiving that one is forgiven.
It is by dying that one awakens to Eternal Life.

As you leave today the ushers have copies of this prayer for you to take with you. My challenge is for each of you to take this prayer, and put it some place that you will read it every day. Then allow its words to prepare you for the work in which you are engaged; the work of helping to clean up the mess of the world as followers of the one whose birth we will soon celebrate and whose power is still arising in the world.