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Make Ready
Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 3:1-6

Our lessons from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament this morning both have the same theme: make ready. Both the Book of Malachi and the Gospel of Luke are speaking about preparation, about getting ready for the Messiah, one who is yet to come.

As I looked at these readings, my mind went back to an experience I had three years ago when I visited New York City. After two friends and I went to an early evening theatre performance, we walked down Fifth Avenue. Suddenly we found ourselves staring up at the gleaming whiteness of St. Patrick's Cathedral, newly restored at a cost of 177 million dollars. We were drawn inside, where several hundred people were sitting and standing in the nave. The restoration process had taken three years, and everything from refurbishing and rehanging the 9,200 pound bronze doors to taking apart the 7900 pipes in the gallery organ had been accomplished (Larry Buchanan, David W. Dunlap, Josh Williams, "A Gift to New York, in Time for the Pope, the New York Times, Sept. 21, 2015).

By all accounts, what got the job done ahead of schedule was when the folks at St. Patrick's found out Pope Francis was coming to the cathedral that September! I wondered what else the City of New York had done to prepare for the visit of the Pontiff, as well as Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia.

This six-day, three-city, two-dozen-event Papal trip was called "...a cross between a military operation, a diplomatic mission and an arena-rock tour" (Andy Newman and Vivian Yee, "Devoted to Simplicity, Pope Francis Creates Knotty Logistics with Visit, The New York Times, Sept. 21, 2015.)

"Making ready" for the first visit of this Pope to America involved extremely precise logistics by thousands of organizers and event planners, stagehands, hospitality personnel, counter terrorism experts, tree pruners, translators, and baggage handlers.

In Philadelphia, plans had to be laid for the concluding mass in which over a million guests were present. In Madison Square Garden, box offices and concession stands were turned into confession booths. The ellipse across from the White House was turned into a half-mile Popemobile track, and more than 40 Jumbotrons were set up in the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia. Arrangements needed to be made for the possibility of using 5,000 police officers, as well as finding accommodations for 150 communications specialists, the Pope's 30-person entourage, and more than 7,000 journalists from around the world.

Maine's own Thomas Moser was commissioned to design chairs that the pope and four cardinals sat on in Independence Hall. The four Catena cherry armchairs list for \$1,490 apiece,

but Mr. Moser donated them. Thomas Moser was also commissioned to design a brace for the 150-year-old lectern in Independence Hall from which the pope spoke. The lectern had been used by Abraham Lincoln to deliver the Gettysburg address and needed stability (“Maine Furniture Maker Thos. Moser to Provide Chairs for the the Pope's Philadelphia Visit,” The Portland Press Herald).

There was great irony in this “making ready,” of course. Pope Francis is a lover of simplicity, modesty and understatement. And yet the preparations for that week were so extremely complex and multi-layered that organizers and event planners had never seen anything like it. In a world where stars insist their dressing rooms be outfitted with their favorite foods and beverages—often hundreds of items--the Pope offered a startling contrast. Still water and bananas were the only items the Holy Father required! But in the final analysis, what that massive operation of Pope Francis' inaugural visit to America was all about was preparation, about making ready.

Our lesson from the Hebrew Bible is from Malachi. For about a thousand years, from Moses to Malachi, God spoke to the people through the prophets. Malachi was Israel's last prophet. He wrote about 450 years before the birth of Christ, and that is what today's lesson is all about: God is telling the people about one who is preparing the way.

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. Significantly, there is a 450-year silence after Malachi. The silence is broken by another messenger, that "wild and wooly" Baptist named John--the subject of our reading from Luke. And John's message is about another messenger, Jesus the Christ.

In writing about this passage from Luke 3, one pastor has said this:

Thank God for Advent. While we shop, trim the tree, and plan the parties, the church is preparing too, not for a holiday, but a holy day. Our communities of faith are preparing the way for the Christ Child to come not only in our own homes but also our hearts as well....Jesus didn't come for just you and me, but for the whole world. Luke makes the universal reach of the gospel quite clear. The good news isn't our secret possession or privilege; it's for all of God's children (Kathryn Matthews Huey, "Make Ready").

That is certainly the way I read Luke's gospel. It gives us an open and affirming, equal opportunity word. And there is no better representative for this "y'all come" philosophy than the "the fore-runner," as he is called, John the Baptist. He may be a wild man, but he is a together wild man. John preaches a radical message; he wants everyone to take a good hard look at who they are and what they are about.

One commentator has said that "[p]reparing for company often causes the hosts to look at their home, to examine their surroundings with a whole new perspective (Kathy Beach-Verhey, Feasting on the Word). That attention to detail was what was behind the Pope's visit to America. For the event organizers, it was all about being “show ready,” as they say at Disney. It is the same kind of penetrating perspective John wants for each of us to give ourselves. He is preaching an extreme makeover message. Repent, he is saying, change your

ways, because "the man" is coming. He quotes the Prophet Isaiah who speaks about how to make ready: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." As our choir sang so beautifully this morning, "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..."

Kate Huey says "Perhaps we wonder as we heard this text, how we might turn our lives around." Living as we do in 2018, you and I are part of a world where many people have abdicated their personal responsibility; everyone else is to blame.

But John the Baptist offers a different message--hard and uncompromising. If you are one who says, for example, I really need to quit drinking or smoking or eating fast food, John would say: Start today! Don't delay. This is the right time. "Repentance" for John, "signals an abrupt end to life on auto-pilot or to business as usual" (Dan Clendenin, "Notes to Myself").

You and I know that as we live our everyday lives, the mountains aren't going to be made low and the crooked straight by way of huge, dramatic changes. We make ready our minds and hearts for the coming of the Christ Child in small ways that still can make a large difference.

A man named Willem Brandt remembers one Christmas that touched his life in a remarkable way. You may have heard Brandt's story in a piece called "The Candle":

The scene: a dank shed ringed by barbed wire in Si Ringo Ringo, a Japanese concentration camp on the east coast of Sumatra. Outside the tropical sun blazed by day and a huge moon filled the fantastically starry sky by night. Inside the shed, perpetual darkness.

There were people living in the shed. No, "living" is a strong word. We were packed away there....

For it had been years now--or was it decades? We were too sick and too weak to care. In the beginning, we thought about such things as the day or the hour. Now, eternity. Beside us and in front of us, men died--from hunger, disease, from the ebbing of the last ray of hope. We had long stopped believing in the end of the war, in liberation. We lived in a stupor, blunted, with only one remaining passion that flew at our throats like a wild animal: hunger. Except when someone caught a snake or a rat, we starved.

There was, however, one man in the camp who still had something to eat. A candle. Of course, he had not originally thought of it as food--a normal person doesn't eat candle wax. But if all you saw around you were emaciated bodies (in which you recognized yourself), you, too, would not underestimate the value of this candle.

When he couldn't stand the torture of hunger anymore, the prisoner would carefully take the candle from its hiding place, a crumpled little suitcase, and nibble at it. He didn't eat it all. He looked upon the candle as his last resort. One day, when everyone was utterly mad with hunger, he would need it.

To me, his friend, he had promised a small piece. So I watched him and his suitcase day and night. It became my life's task to see to it that in the end he would not eat the entire candle by himself.

One evening, after counting the notches he'd made in a beam, another prisoner mentioned that it was Christmas. In a flat, toneless voice he said, "Next Christmas we'll be home." A few of us nodded; most didn't react at all. Who could still cling to that idea?

Then someone said something very strange: "When it is Christmas, the candles burn and there are bells ringing." His words were barely audible, as if they came from an immense distance and a deep, deep past. To most of us, the remark had no meaning whatsoever; it referred to something completely out of our existence.

We were already very late, and we lay on our boards, each with his thoughts--or more accurately, with no thoughts. Then my friend became restless. He crept toward his suitcase and took out the candle. I could see its whiteness clearly in the dark. He is going to eat it, I thought. If only he won't forget me.

He put the candle on his plank bed. What now? He went outside, where our captors kept a fire smoldering. Then he returned, carrying a burning chip. This little flare wandered through the shed like a ghost. When my friend reached his place, he took the chip, the fire, and he lit his candle.

The candle stood on his bed, and it burned.

No one said a word, but soon one shadow after another slipped closer. Silently these half-naked men with sunken cheeks and eyes full of hunger formed a circle around the burning candle.

One by one they came forward, the vicar and the parson, too. You couldn't tell that's what they were, for they were merely two more wasted figures, but we knew.

"It's Christmas," said the parson in a husky voice. "The light shineth in darkness."

Then the vicar said, "And the darkness overcame it not."

You can find it in the Gospel according to St. John. But that night, around that candle, it was not some written word from centuries ago. It was living reality, a message for each of us.

For the light shone in the darkness. And the darkness didn't conquer it. We knew this not because we reasoned it out at the time, but because we felt it, silently, around the piercing flame.

The candle was white and more slender than any I have seen since. And in the flame (Though I'm sure I can ever describe it, not really--it was a secret we shared with the Christ-Child) we saw things that were not of this world. We were deep in the swamps and the jungle, but now we heard the bronze sound of a thousand bells ringing and a choir of angels singing for

us. Yes, I am perfectly sure--I have over a hundred witnesses. Most of them can't speak anymore; they are no longer here. But that doesn't mean they don't know.

The candle burned higher and higher, ever more pointed, until it touched the very roof of the dark shed, and then it went on, reaching to the stars. Everything became full of light. Not one of us ever saw so much light again.

We were free, and uplifted, and we were not hungry.

Now someone said softly, "Next Christmas we'll be home," and this time we knew it was true. For the light itself had given us this message--it was written in the Christmas flame in fiery letters. You can believe it or not; I saw it myself.

The candle burned all night. (Yes, I know there is not a candle in the world that can burn so long and so high), and when morning came, we sang. Now we knew that there was a home waiting for each of us.

And there was. Some of us went home before the next Christmas. The others? Well, they were home as well. I helped to lay them down in the earth behind our camp, a dry spot in the swamp. But when they died, their eyes were not as dim as before. They were filled with light, our candle's light, the light that the darkness did not conquer (Willem Brandt, "The Candle").

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

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