

GETTING READY FOR CHRISTMAS

Scriptures: Mark 1:1-8; Malachi 3:1-4

There is a great little book in our church library called *Home to Harmony* by Philip Gulley. It tells about a small Quaker church in the Midwestern town of Harmony. Like most churches, this Quaker church had certain members that are—shall I say—challenging. One of them was Bob Miles, Sr. In 1960 Bob founded the Live Free or Die Sunday School class. He used it as a forum to warn against communism, moral decadence, Federal monetary policy. At least once a month he brought up these same issues during the prayers of the people in church. Finally, one of the elders, Miriam Hodge, came up with an idea.

“We’ll make Bob our Official Prayer Warrior,” she said, “but we’ll have him pray according to Scripture.” She opened her Bible to the Gospel of Matthew and read from chapter 6, “When you pray, go into your closet and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” Miriam said, “The only closet in the meetinghouse is down in the basement, next to the furnace. We can put him down there on Sunday mornings. He’ll be out of our hair.”

The pastor thought that was a great idea. Philip Gulley writes,

The next Sunday Bob went downstairs to the utility closet, closed the door behind him, and sat on a folding chair next to the furnace. We sang our hymns, I preached my sermon without fear of rebuttal, and then we settled into silence so the Lord could speak. People were relaxed. This was wonderful. We didn’t have to worry about Bob rising to his feet and wading in. ... It was then we heard Bob’s voice rising up through the heating vents. “OH LORD, THESE ARE A STIFF-NECKED PEOPLE WHO SCORN TRUTH. STRIKE THEM DOWN IN THEIR INSOLENT. BREAK THEIR HAUGHTY SPIRITS.” He went on and on. We could hear each word. The heating ducts were serving as a kind of bullhorn. Bob prayed for fifteen minutes. He beseeched the Lord to chasten us. He railed against the Communist threat. He prophesied against the New World Order and Democrats and bar codes. Jessie Peacock, who sat over the furnace, pounded the floor with her foot. Bob prayed even louder. “BRING THEM TO THEIR KNEES, LORD” and “WOE TO YOU, HYPOCRITES.” It was John the Baptist come to life. Finally he stopped. I prayed a closing prayer—loud so Bob Sr. would know church was over. Bob came upstairs. Miriam Hodge and I met him at the front door. Miriam said, “Bob, we had in mind you’d sort of whisper your prayers.” Bob Sr. drew himself up and stared at Miriam and said, “Warriors don’t whisper.” And he walked out the door (pp. 83-85).

I wonder if John the Baptist had that effect on people. Mark’s gospel does not elaborate on John’s preaching, but Luke does. In Luke’s gospel John says to the people coming for baptism, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” He sounds like Bob Sr.

If you had asked the Jews in John's time, "Are you ready for the Messiah to come? Are you ready to welcome God's promised king who will bring God's righteousness and peace to the world," I think many would have said, "Sure, we're ready. This world is pretty messed up, what with violence and poverty and evil empires, like the Romans. We would love to have God come and straighten all this out."

But let me ask you a question: If God actually showed up in this world, if God's promised king really came and straightened out all the violence, injustice, poverty, and suffering in the world, if the Messiah came and began rooting out all the angry, greedy, lustful, resentful, bigoted, and pride-filled people in this world, would you be ready for that?

Our first scripture lesson warns that the coming of God's kingdom requires preparation. In Malachi 3, verse 1, God says, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple." But then verse 2 says, "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."

I have read that wherever the Queen of England goes she always smells fresh paint. To welcome a queen or a king you need to clean house and scrub things down, and that is even truer of preparing for God's king, only it is not your house that needs scrubbing but you.

At the beginning of Mark's gospel, Mark quotes this scripture passage from Malachi, but he makes a subtle change. In Malachi 3:1 God says, "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 is preparing the way for God. But in Mark 1:2 God says, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of *you*, who will prepare *your* way." Do you see the subtle difference? The messenger is sent not only to prepare the way for God but for someone whom God will send.

As the following verses make clear, the messenger is John the Baptist, and the one for whom he prepares is Jesus. In other words, and this is a crucial point, the messenger who is sent to prepare the way for God, ends up preparing the way for Jesus, and when God finally shows up in the world, God shows up in the person of Jesus.

Like most pastor families, my family does not go anywhere for Christmas, at least not on Christmas Eve. We stay right here. It's nice in a way. We never have to worry about whose relatives we are going to visit for Christmas. If anyone wants to spend Christmas with us, they have to come to our house. It does mean, however, that sometimes we have to prepare for guests: make up some extra beds, prepare some extra food, and even clean the house.

But imagine the preparations that would be required in your home and in your life to welcome a guest like Jesus. Jesus once said, "If you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council." Imagine what changes your family would have to make in the way they treat each other if you had a guest in your house like that. Jesus also said, "Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." How many changes would you have to make in your viewing habits or in your internet surfing habits to accommodate a guest like that?

Jesus also said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” How many changes in your home, possessions, or lifestyle would be required to welcome a guest like that?

That is what the Bible means by repentance: changing your life, turning yourself around, getting your priorities straightened out. John the Baptist came preaching a baptism of repentance because unless you clean up, turn around, and prepare yourself for a whole new way of life, you won't be ready for Christmas—the coming of Christ, God's promised king.

There is a song by Tracy Chapman called “Change.” Part of it goes like this:

If you knew that you would die today, if you saw the face of God and love,
Would you change? Would you change?
If you knew that love can't break your heart
When you're down so low you cannot fall,
Would you change? Would you change?

How bad, how good does it need to get?
How many losses, how much regret?
What chain reaction, what cause and effect,
Makes you turn around, makes you try to explain,
Makes you forgive and forget,
Makes you change, makes you change. ...

If everything you know makes your life unbearable,
Would you change? Would you change?
If you'd broken every rule and vow,
And hard times come to bring you down,
Would you change? Would you change?

If you knew that you would die today, if you saw the face of God and love,
Would you change? Would you change?

That is the question posed by John the Baptist. If Jesus actually showed up in your life this Christmas, would you change? Would you change?

- Ken Onstot
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