



5 December 2021
Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6
Advent 2, Dare we Imagine God's Embrace?
First Mennonite Church

Preparations for the season are around us. Christmas trees decorated. Christmas lights in church buildings, on condo balconies, and on the lawns and roofs of houses. There are the familiar sounds of an economy in motion: packages delivered, money exchanging hands, and people buying gifts. Many are planning family gatherings and getting ingredients for those special Christmas meals.

The prophet Malachi encourages us to prepare as well because *the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple*. My question is, how

will know when the Lord whom we seek will suddenly show up? How will we know when we've been embraced by the peace of God that passes all understanding? The short answer is preparation. If you don't prepare for the embrace, you could wind up hugging air, which is maybe okay in a pandemic! If you don't prepare you could find yourself at the end of an awkward hug!



Unlike Isaiah who describes the day of the Lord in terms of swords being turned into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, Malachi doesn't tell us what that day will look like when the Lord suddenly comes. But he does tell us that the Lord is coming. And the preparation required to see, hear, and

experience God's embrace doesn't include buying more stuff, rushing here and there, or filling time with superficial busyness.

The book of Malachi was written about 470 years before the birth of Jesus, decades after the people of Israel returned from Babylonian exile. Now, that they had returned to their homeland, rebuilt the Temple, folks eagerly expected the final restoration of all that God had promised them—the coming of a Messiah who would dwell among them, judgment on the Gentile nations who had oppressed Israel, harmony, and lasting peace and justice. In other words, people waited for God's embrace—an eternal group hug of Shalom. But Malachi said, hold on. You're not yet prepared to see the world God inhabits, not yet prepared to experience God's embrace. You're still trying to manipulate God with your sacrifices, still engaging in social injustice, and failing in your covenant duties.

This passage dares to imagine the advent of God among us— “the Lord whom you seek”—and the preparation required for us to catch a glimpse of God's world that is coming. The preparation involves letting go of the things that bind us, the parts of our lives that crowd out the spiritual preparation necessary to experience God's embrace. Malachi suggests that the process of preparation involves submitting to this rather abrasive yet transformative process of refining and cleansing. Malachi compares this renewal process to a refiner's fire and fuller's soap.

In my reading of metallurgy, I understand that to make steel requires putting certain types of rock into a blast furnace so incredibly hot that the rock melts to the point where you can separate the metals you want from the stuff you don't want. Then, through a series of processes, the material is purified into steel.

A fuller was a person who took raw, filthy, and smelly wool from freshly shorn sheep, and cleaned it using an extremely harsh soap. Once done, the wool could be made into a blanket that would embrace us, keeping us comfy and warm.

Too often, we think of God's judgement consisting of an angry preacher talking about an angry God who is ready to pounce and punish whenever we mess up or make a mistake. NO. The purpose of divine judgement here in Malachi is NOT to punish. The purpose is NOT to scare us or make us afraid we aren't doing enough to get on God's good side.

It's important to remember that we are not God. In the metaphor, we are only the rock and the wool. If we want to see God, experience God's embrace, **then we must allow God to refine and clean us.** We must give up control. Spiritual renewal can only come through an intense and uncomfortable process of refining and cleaning. If we want to see and experience the love, peace, harmony—the embrace of a loving and caring God this Christmas, we need to give our lives into God's hands to be molded and changed. The purpose of the refiner's fire and fuller's soap is to change us, purify us, transform us, prepare us to see, hear, and experience God's advent among us. Its purpose is to prepare the way of the Lord!

In John's gospel, the spiritual preparation required to see God's world is like a tree being pruned. It's an uncomfortable metaphor where we are like a tree in the hands of an eager gardener who cuts away the twigs and branches that bears no fruit (John 15:1-17). Can you imagine God cutting away our penchant for violence, cutting away our deeply held negative assumptions about other people and cultures, cutting away our warped understandings of God, the Bible, and what it means to be a disciple? Can you imagine what a tree feels like in the hands of an eager gardener with pruning shears?

Luke's gospel describes the spiritual process of preparation in terms of adjusting the way we see and hear. As I studied Luke 3:1-6, I couldn't at first, understand why Luke spilt so much ink in the first two verses, writing the names of all these hard-to-pronounce leaders of the ancient world. Didn't he know that 2000 years later poor worship leaders would need to pronounce them in public worship? That said, I was quite impressed with how Elfrieda read those names, almost like they were her close friends or relatives.

Read the names and their positions and you find they are the who's who of the Roman Empire, the superpower of the ancient world. These people represent the pinnacle of political, military, and religious power at that time. Today, too, we are accustomed to seeing and hearing people speak from the halls of power in Washington, Beijing, Moscow, and Ottawa. Each day we are bombarded with hundreds, some say, thousands of advertisements telling us what's most important, what we must desire—from the right kind of home with the perfect kitchen, to how long your dress is, to the thinness of your tie. Each day we are bombarded with messages by companies hoping to shape how we think, act, see, hear, and prioritize. They want us to imagine a world.

Not God's world, but a capitalist world where greed is the desired character trait.

It's for this reason Luke begins this section in the way he does. This is how things are in the world. It's a place where Tiberius is the emperor of the known world, Pilate the governor of Judea, and Herod and Philip rulers of regions around Judea, and Annas and Caiaphas the high priests of the Jewish faith. If you want to know how the world works, these folks will not only tell you but will even impose their views upon you.

But, if you want to see what God is up to, where God is working in the world, well, you need a different set of eyes and ears. You must head into the wilderness and listen to what some young upstart, who has no sense of fashion, has to say! *"...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness"* (John 3:3b). And this person out in the wilderness urges us to prepare by repenting. Repentance will help us to prepare.

The church and Christians have struggled with this word over the years. At times, repentance has been equated with doing penance for one's sins through such penitential actions as fasting, special prayers, or pilgrimages. In today's world, repentance is often understood primarily as a feeling, a feeling of sorrow or regret about one's sins. Sometimes preachers use emotional rhetoric, along with a good dose of judgement, so that we'll all feel sad, anxious, and guilty that we're somehow not doing enough or don't measure up. And all too often, it's come in the form of scolding.

In its simplest meaning, the word for repentance can mean something simply as to change your mind. In the Bible, however, the word, repentance, carries a much richer meaning beyond simply changing your mind. In the Bible repentance means to turn around or return. Stop and change direction. It involves your entire body—the way you act, the way you think, feel, hear, and see. It means to stop walking off in that direction, turn around, and head back in that direction. It's about turning around and going in the direction of God or turning towards God and living in God's world.

Let's be clear: Repentance is not about feeling bad or reciting the 4 spiritual laws. Repentance is not a private thing between a lone individual and God in a closet somewhere. Repentance goes beyond doing penance. Rather, repentance is a re-orientation of life, a total turnaround in our priorities and

values, a change of perspective and direction, and a commitment to turn and live differently. In other words, repentance is about change.

Of course, undergoing such a process of change and transformation is fraught with anxiety and unease. What are the things we must let go of? What are the things binding us from experiencing God's embrace? How might our thinking change if instead of taking our cues from the Caesars of this world, we'd take them from the carpenter of Nazareth? This person is usually seen in the wilderness, hanging out with those on the margins—with those struggling on 20th Street, or with those who have absolutely no voice or power in our society. What would we have to give up in order to spend time with that carpenter, out there?

The process of transforming rock into steel, raw wool into a comfortable sweater is uncomfortable and unpleasant. Is there anyone who thinks that going through a blast furnace or being submerged in bleach is a good time? How can moving from our comfortable pew out into the wilderness be fun and games?

The words of Malachi and Luke are at odds with so much of our Advent expectations. Our preparations are often informed by pastoral images of sweet baby Jesus surrounded by choirs of angels and calm, sweet-smelling sheep around the manger. And while we can affirm that the coming of Jesus Christ, the prince of peace, is good news of great joy for all people, this does not mean that Christ's presence demands nothing of us or leaves us unchanged. Like a refiner's fire and cleansing soap or travelling out into the wilderness, the preparations required mean we must change.

The good news is our world isn't fixed and nailed down. God's Spirit can transform us. We can, with our changed eyes of faith, see the small signs of God's embrace around us.



Back in January 2019, one of the longest worship services ever recorded ended. This marathon church service took place in the Netherlands and lasted for more than 96 days! Yes, that's more than three months. Yes, 24 hours every day for more than 96 days. It involved nearly 1,000

pastors and priests from many different denominational backgrounds, and many, many volunteers.

You see, the Bethel Church in The Hague had learned to know the Tamrazyans, a family of 5 who were originally from Armenia. The family fled to the Netherlands after the father was forced to flee Armenia for political reasons in 2010.

In a six-year legal process, Dutch officials twice tried to deny the family asylum, and were twice defeated in court. But the government finally got its way on its third attempt. To avoid what they believed to be certain danger back in Armenia, the family took refuge in a church. This is where the Bethel Church became involved.

There is an obscure Dutch law that forbids the police from interrupting church services, so the folks at Bethel Church began to worship, not just for one hour on a Sunday, but for 24 hours. Every day. Every week. Every month for more than 3 months. And it involved a lot of organization and participation from all sorts of people. Can you imagine FMC taking the midnight to 7am shift two or three times a week to worship? That is what many congregations did for more than 2300 hours until an agreement with the government was reached allowing the Tamrazyan family to remain in the Netherlands.

In the face of rising xenophobia in Europe, that is, the dislike or prejudice against people from other countries, the church chose to live out the call in Psalm 82 to "rescue the weak and the needy." Ms. Rosaliene Israel, the



secretary general of Protestant Church Amsterdam said, “we’re kind of struggling here as churches in the West, we’re more and more in the margins...but with this, we feel that what we’re doing is quite relevant.”¹

This Advent we dare to imagine God embracing the world with peace, justice, and harmony. While we wait for God’s world to fully come on earth as it is in heaven, **we embrace the weak and needy today.**

Embracing vulnerable people is something FMC has done in the past with the Vietnamese in the 1980s and the Columbians between the years 2008-2012/13. We will do this again, hopefully, in the not-to-distant future. Two years ago, we agreed to support this Congolese refugee family, the Lupukis, who are currently living in S. Africa. We hope to embrace them when they finally get their papers from the Canadian Embassy in S. Africa!

One more story of embrace. Years ago, the husband of a couple who had been married for decades, died. The family had the funeral, and once everyone returned to their regular lives, the spouse who remained had to learn how she was going to live as a single person. One of the things they did as a couple was attend church. But how would she attend as a single person. The usual place she and her husband sat was filled with memories. How would she cope with that? As part of her grief work, she returned to church. But instead of needing to sit alone, another woman who knew what she was going through joined her and sat with her. She didn’t need to be alone. God’s embrace is like that.

Here we are this morning, daring to imagine God’s embrace. This same God who spoke to Malachi and John is also speaking to us. This same Spirit can act in us, through us, and beyond us. God’s Spirit is with us. Can we dare imagine God inviting us to do obedient things we have not yet done, kingdom things we did not think we had in us, and even neighbour things from which we cringe?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/world/europe/migrants-dutch-church-service.html>

God will someday embrace all creation by bringing about a new heaven and a new earth. In the meantime, God's embrace is already here even though it's not fully here. Go and be God's peace to others. Go and embrace the world with the peace of God that passes all understanding. Amen.