

STATE OF EMERGENCY

Most of life is not lived in crisis – which I'd say is a good thing. Not many of us would be able to sustain a life of perpetual pain or loss or even ecstasy or challenge. We need ups and downs in life – crisis and calm – balance. However, crisis has this going for it: in times of crisis everything is cast into stark relief – every detail becomes important and significant. Life itself is on the line – no word is casual – no action marginal – and God, our relationship with God, is front and centre – breaking news.

During the humdrum times – ordinary times – when things are *normal* – in these times, God is crowded to the sidelines of our lives and we become preoccupied with ourselves. *Religion* is trivialized into asking *if God really exists* – or alternatively, complaining about God – treating worship as a mere hobby or diversion – something to entertain. In routine, run-of-the-mill time we manage our personal affairs for our own convenience – disregarding what God might say about them – going about our usual activities as if God were not involved.

The message in the book of Malachi is made to order for just such circumstances as these. Malachi creates a sense of crisis at a time when we are unaware that anything is amiss. He wakes us up to the emergency of God's presence during the times when the only thing we are concerned with is ourselves. He keeps us on our toes – listening for God – waiting in anticipation for God – preparing to respond to God who is always coming to us.

The book of Malachi is *terra incognita* to most people. We don't know much about the Old Testament's closing book – I had to sit down and read it this week to refresh my memory. This is the last word of anyone in the Bible until, some 400 years later; a prophet named John cleared his throat to shout out, "Repent! Prepare the way of the Lord!" And that definitely ties in with Malachi's message and explains why it is paired with Luke's reading for this Sunday.

In terms of history, Malachi was likely a contemporary of Nehemiah – living at a time when Jerusalem was rebuilt after the Israelites returned to Judah following their seventy years as prisoners in Babylon. It was a relatively happy time for the Israelites – crises free, if you will. There was a sense for Israel that their long, national nightmare was over. The wretched Babylonians were no more, having themselves been conquered by the Persians, who had let the Israelites go free to rebuild their shattered homeland. The Israelites were not politically independent yet – living under the rule of the local Persian governor – still, life was better now than it had been in a long time.

Despite that, Malachi is not a happy book. Its overarching message is encouraging – *God still loves the people and **will** send the Messiah one day*. In the meantime the people are told that they had better shape up – they better get ready for God's messenger. If they don't, the message is clear: *Remember how bad it was when the Babylonians came? It will be worse – much worse!*

A main target of Malachi's prophetic fire was the clergy. The priests were spiritually lax. They didn't preach the Word of God but instead whatever they thought would keep them popular. When it came to animal sacrifices in the restored Temple, it seemed that their attitude was *anything goes*.

The people were supposed to bring their first fruits – the best of what God had given to them. But that seemed a bit too much to ask, so the people had gotten into the habit of keeping the best for themselves and bringing the worst they had to God.

With biting sarcasm, Malachi reminds the people that they would never treat anyone else in their lives the way they were treating God. If your boss came over for dinner one evening and asked for a porterhouse steak, would you dish up some of the beef suet you were saving for your bird feeder? If the Persian governor asked you to pay taxes in the form of some vegetables from your garden, would you dare to bring the governor only the wormy tomatoes and the stunted ears of corn?

Of course not! So Malachi's burning question was "How come you treat other people more respectfully than God!?" The people were holding back from God. They were feathering their own nests and padding their own bank accounts first, bringing to God whatever was leftover. To Malachi's way of thinking, that merely reflected the more distressing fact that God was not looming very large on the horizon of people's imaginations. This was ordinary time and God didn't seem so very important just now.

Malachi was charged by God to get the people's attention. He had to return God to the center of their lives. The good news is that if the people could achieve that kind of God-consciousness in their daily lives, God would shine down on them like a glorious sunrise. If the people could come to realize once again that following God's way is not a restrictive way to live but a liberating one, then they would discover a freedom and a joy they had never before known.

The image Malachi uses is of a calf or a colt frisking and frolicking as it bursts with energy from its corral – but I see our young labradoodle, Abigail, taken off her leash on the beach or the park in the early morning – leaping and bounding for the pure joy of it. It's a delight! The picture is clear – as we follow the way of the Lord, we get released into the unalloyed joy of existence.

God wants this to happen and God has promised that it will happen. The Lord **is** coming. The question is, are we prepared? Are we ready to receive the Lord? Have we been open to God preparing us?

God's part is to send a messenger to announce the good news – to prepare the way. We read of this in Malachi just before the canon of Scripture falls silent for around 400 years. These last words in the Old Testament point ahead to that time when, in the person of John, things will get rolling again. The conclusion of Malachi's message and the beginning of John the Baptist's message is this: *God is gracious and wants to shine down abundant life on us. But we need to be ready.*

The messenger comes to prepare the way. John the Baptist comes from the wilderness – comes from what some might call sinful darkness. The messenger comes crying out for preparation using an image familiar to the people of Israel – reminding them of Isaiah's words from so long ago and the picture of ancient kings traveling in the Babylonian Empire.

In those days when a king would travel to a less-inhabited region, a core group of royal engineers would prepare the road for the king to pass. They would smooth out the road so that the king's chariot would not get stuck in a rut. They would level out hills and valleys so the journey would not be so treacherous and the king would have safe passage. The road had to be prepared for the king to come.

Isaiah used these words to inspired hope among the Jewish exiles who were languishing, far from their homeland, in the grandiose city of Babylon. This was a message that promised the Hebrew exiles a return home. Poetically, Isaiah declared that a highway would be opened up across the deserts to their homeland. The valleys would be filled, the hills leveled, the crooked path straightened and rough sections made smooth. It was the promise of a physical return home.

The messenger tells us to prepare the way for the king. Into the humdrum routine of the people's lives, John stirs things up – creates a state of emergency just as Malachi had done those centuries before. John announces Jesus as the king who comes to dwell in our hearts, so that is where the preparation is needed. The prophet takes the words of Isaiah and applies them in a personal sense – to the things of the human spirit. He calls upon his hearers to let God straighten out their lives – to repent and return home to God. In this way they can be prepared for the coming of the Messiah – prepared for living in Christ and having Christ live in them.

So what about us? Are we prepared? Is preparation even important any more – perhaps an impromptu, spontaneous, ad lib approach is what is called for today. Life is going along just fine – we are managing the affairs of the earth and God is in the heavens – everything is just as it should be. Crisis – what crisis? John, like Malachi, seeks to create a sense of urgency in us – to wake us up to the predicament we are in. We keep God sidelined – tucked neatly into Sunday morning – yet God continues to break into the world – God yearns to be present in the centre of our lives.

The words of the prophets keep us on our toes – listening for God – waiting in anticipation for God – preparing to respond to God who is always coming to us.

We are all called to prepare... and preparation does matter. Without it, the world – and maybe even the church – too easily misses the deep heart of Christmas.

To be really ready, the corrupt do need to do something about their crookedness, the rough are required to do something about their abrasiveness, the timid are obliged to assert themselves and the proud must deflate their egos. Each one needs to feel the urgency of God within.

John the Baptist tells us to actively prepare. In this preparation we not only make ready the way of the Lord but make ourselves ready. In being ready we are all set to live abundantly in the presence of our Lord – to be released into the undiminished joy of being.

Prepared people will see the golden glints of the glory of God in many unexpected places and events. It is true that Advent, the pre-Christmas season, is becoming a time when it is difficult to spot the glints of the glory of God among the slag heaps of piped music, Santa Claus mania, galloping consumerism, compulsive workplace binge parties, and trivial, sentimental religion. These days, finding the naked love of God in Jesus is no easy task.

We are called to a state of emergency – prepare! Deal with things as they really are – the crooked in us needs straightening – the rough needs sanding down – the cringing self needs lifting up – the pride needs leveling.

For the people in Malachi's day, God had faded a bit into the background. God wasn't the center of their lives, and so they didn't even try to give God their best. It seems a true statement that the more things change; the more they stay the same. Malachi brought God back into focus – reminding people of their need to reassess the situation around them and perceive the crisis of their faith.

John continues by announcing that if we truly want our own *flesh to see the salvation of God*, then we must want it with all our being, want it urgently, want it passionately enough to do the work of preparation. Then, by the grace of the child in a manger and the power of the Holy Spirit, it will happen.

Blessed are those who prepare – they shall see God and rest in the divine embrace. **Amen.**



This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh, 2009