

Preparing the Way

Malachi 3:1-4 ^{NRS} **Malachi 3:1** 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 of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² 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; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:1-6 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ 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; ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Christmas is only weeks away and the preparations for its arrival is in full swing. Lights and decorations are going up on houses all over the city. Christmas trees and nativity scenes are popping up in houses, churches, and city squares all over the country. Parents and grandparents are completing their shopping chores, sending holiday greeting cards and planning parties. Presents are wrapped in beautiful paper and ribbon not only to hide what is inside, but to add to the mystery. We work very hard to get ready for this one-day event.

When we know that company is coming to our home to visit or when we have invited guests for a party, we work very hard to prepare our home for the event. We vacuum, we dust, we clean and straighten. We work very hard to make sure that everything is ready.

What is the difference between preparing our home for guests or decorating for Christmas, and preparing our hearts to receive Jesus?

The first and most obvious difference is the that there is a set time for these events to occur. An invited guest is expected on a certain day at a certain time. Christmas always comes on December 25th every year without fail. In both cases we know for sure the exact time that these things will take place. On the other hand, the second coming of Jesus is something that is predicted but there is no specific time table for his arrival. The only thing that we can be certain of is that it has not happened yet.

Like I told the children, if we compare getting our hearts ready for Jesus to keeping our house in order, then doing a little bit every day will make sure that everything is ready no matter when Jesus returns.

Another big difference between decorating for Christmas or preparing for a visit in our home is what happens after the event is over. When Christmas is over, we leave the decorations up for a few more days, but eventually everything goes back to the way it was before Christmas. And after the guests leave our home, the good china gets put away, and the guest towels go back into the linen closet.

This I believe, gets to the heart of the matter. When Jesus returns this time, nothing will be the same and He won't be leaving again. The first time Jesus came was to die on the cross and have his death be payment for our sins. The next time he comes it will be as a conquering king to establish forever the kingdom of God here on earth. We won't have to put the good china away or take the decorations down because there will be no end to the celebration.

The scripture lesson today described the ministry of John the Baptist and showed that his work was to get the people of Jerusalem and the surrounding area ready to Jesus the Savior. Our job is to get the whole world ready to receive Jesus the king.