

Luke 3:1-6 and Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 1:69-78

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” My goodness, how many of you have had to either dig paths yourself, or have someone dig a path for you this past week? And, with the ruts in the roads, wouldn't it have been nice if somehow the rough road could have been smoothed into a flat, even path? Well, I guess that did happen eventually once the plows and graters were able to get through. How wonderful that was!

But what the plows did wasn't really the leveling out that John the Baptist was calling for when he cried out the words from the book of Baruch (an apocryphal book of the Bible.) The plows did clear a way, and made somewhat of a smooth path, but the leveling John is speaking of means that the mountains would come down a bit, and the valleys will raise up a bit to make a level pathway. He was out in the wilderness speaking to the people who came to see him, using an allegory that would be easily understood by them, knowing it would be carried back to those who were in power. He was saying that the ruling class would be on a level base with those whom they oppressed.

This is difficult for those of us who are not oppressed to understand. Perhaps being held captive by covid in 2020, and then, for some of us, being held captive by the snow this past week might feel like oppression, however we were never under the pressures the people were in the time of Jesus. It was a tenuous relationship between the Jews and the Romans; only because the Jewish people were so tenacious about holding onto their religion were they able to continue practicing their faith. At any time the Romans would have taken steps to incorporate the Jews into their pagan belief system. Tiberius, the Roman emperor of the day was cruel, especially harsh to Judaism. Persecution of the Roman Jews without following a legal process was common under his rule. Pontius Pilot, the governor of Galilee and Jerusalem was even worse in his persecution of the Jews than was the emperor who had to restrain him on occasion. His rule was characterized by bribery, violence, robbery, persecutions, malicious insults, murders and cruelty. The High Priest Caiaphas, and Annas, a former High-Priest who ruled over the Sanhedrin were simply puppets under their control (Edersheim, A. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library. 1883).

We do not personally face this oppression in our society. Yet we are awaiting the Messiah, just as those people listening to John the Baptist were awaiting a Messiah. Every year we take the four weeks before Christmas, the season of Advent, to remember the birth of the baby Jesus into our world. Yet the season is more than just a remembrance, it is a time of preparation for the second coming of Christ.

We heard a warning from the prophet Malachi telling us that the day is coming when the Lord shall appear. That a messenger will come first. We take this to be John the Baptist who appealed to the people to prepare the way of the Lord so that all could see God's salvation. He calls for a restoration, a repentance. He is prophesying that a day of cleansing will be at hand. When we think of fullers' soap, we might think of the Fuller Brush Man who sold fairly mild cleaning products. That isn't what Malachi is speaking of... fullers' soap was alkaline, burning, something that would remove a layer of skin. Yet it was not done in judgement, but to cleanse, to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

Which means that we may need to look deeper into our hearts and souls to find that which needs to be cleared away so that we may be pure for the coming of the Messiah.

Invite the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to what it is in your life that needs to be changed. Listen for the response because there will be one. It may not be something you like, nor may it be something you want to change. It is your decision to follow God's will.

Zechariah followed God's will when he named his son John. When he didn't believe the angel Gabriel who told him he and Elizabeth would have a son in their old age whom they would name John, Zechariah was stricken with 9 months of not being able to speak. For nine months he had to write anything he wanted to say. When it came time to name John, the relatives who were gathered around Elizabeth couldn't believe she would want to name him something other than a family name. Zechariah wrote, "His name is John," and he once again could talk.

You may wonder why Mary, who also questioned the angel, was not silenced for the duration of her pregnancy. Or maybe you do know. Her response was not one of disbelief as was Zechariah's, hers was an honest inquiry... How can this be? And when she obeyed God's will her life changed drastically. We would like to think that she would have been held in a place of honor to be carrying God's son, but that is not what happened at all. People would have considered her a sinner who could not wait to be married before being with a man. She could have been stoned to death. Instead, she and Joseph took the shame upon themselves. They made a way where the going was difficult so that we can know God's salvation through Jesus.

We are hearing the beginning of a story to which we know the end. Perhaps you have a favorite story, one that you've heard over and over again and still enjoy hearing it even though you know how it ends. I'm going to say mine would be *The Little Engine that Could*. It's a children's book which teaches that through determination we can do what we never thought possible. The little train engine had a heavy load that he needed to pull up a huge hill. Instead of looking at it as an obstacle he repeated over and over, "I think I can. I think I can. I think I can." As he got closer to the top, "I know I can. I know I can. I know I can." At the top, "I can!" And down the other side of the hill he coasted. It demonstrates the power of a positive attitude.

Yet we know that everything in life is not that easy. Sometimes even when we go in with a positive attitude, think we can do something, we can't. It's then that it is hard to hold onto hope. Perhaps we find our hope in something different than what we had originally expected. Just as Israel had hoped for a Messiah who would bring their people out from the oppressive Roman rule, the Messiah is someone quite different. The hope we now have is that we have salvation through the Messiah. John is bringing that message, we have the salvation of God in the flesh, Jesus. Having that hope does not guarantee this life will be easy however it gives us the promise that God will be with us no matter what happens in our life.

So be brave this week, take a quiet break and ask the Holy Spirit to show you what needs to be cleansed from within your heart, your mind, your soul. Then with joy and thanksgiving ask God for help to move on from that which holds you captive. It may be as simple as smiling more often, but it may be as difficult as forgiving someone you don't want to forgive, or, putting aside your wants for the needs of another person. Prepare your heart for the birth of a baby in a humble manger and for the second coming of Christ in triumph. All glory be to God.