

“We Have Time”

Based on Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 3:1-6

First delivered Dec. 9, 2018

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Whatever you thought of his presidency or his policies, and they are definitely a mixed bag, the multi-day celebration of the life of George H. W. Bush was a spectacle. The state funeral at the national cathedral, with all the military honors and the 21 gun salute; the second funeral at Houston with 1,000 guests; the funeral train that slowly made its way from Houston to College Station so that regular folks could line up along the tracks to pay their respects; the 21 plane missing man formation flyover provided by the navy pilots in their fighter jets; it was quite a send-off for this man.

Consider the meticulous planning and preparations that had to happen to pull all this off in what seemed to us who were watching, to go without a hitch. There was the logistics of getting the Bush family and their entourage from Houston, to Washington, back to Houston and then to College Station. The church choirs and the military choirs had to rehearse the music so they would be ready to sing when the time came. The soaring and moving eulogies to be offered by those whom George Bush wanted to speak at his funerals had to be crafted and honed. All the movements had to be choreographed to the tiniest detail: where people would sit, where they would stand, how they would move from one place to another. The cars, the plane, the train, had to be all polished and sparkling. I have never seen a train so clean in my life. All those programs had to be printed. It goes on and on. Without a doubt, what we saw was the fruits of years of planning and preparation.

Of course, they had time to prepare. George Bush had not been the best of health for a number of years and was blessed to live to the age of

94. Everyone knew this time would come so there was an opportunity to meticulously plan everything to the slightest detail. Everything had to be ready so that when the time came, no one knew when that would be, then everyone would be ready, everything would be prepared. It was pointed out that the Oak Ridge Boys, who sang at the funeral in Houston, are touring right now. So the members of the group were travelling with their funeral clothes just in case they would be called at the last minute to make their way to Houston. The church must have had the bulletins with the order of worship all ready to go and ready for printing. They just needed to add the date and time of the service. The day before George Bush's body took the train ride to College Station, Union Pacific installed the Plexiglas windows in the retrofitted baggage car so that folks could see the coffin as the train moved through their little town. Everything was ready. All the obstacles had been removed, everything was straightened out, so that the people of this nation could have the opportunity to get close to the president and pay their final respects. But not only that, the obstacles were removed so that the Bush family could tell a story about George H. W. Bush, a president and a patriot, not a perfect man, but a gentle man, a public servant, humble, dutiful, loyal, and loving. All that planning made it possible for their story to be told as they wanted it, to shape how they wanted George Bush to be remembered.

I couldn't stop thinking about these past few days while reflecting on the scriptures we have before us this morning, texts that focus on the necessity of preparation. In both texts, there is expressed an expectation of the coming of the Lord, the day of salvation. Now is the time to prepare for that arrival. This is not just any VIP. This is the Lord, almighty God. It is unquestioned that before the Lord arrives preparations have to be made. Don't know when the Lord will come. But the Lord is coming. So we have to get ready.

Both of these texts talk about sending in the advance team of one. For Malachi it is an unnamed messenger and for Luke it is John the Baptist. For Malachi, when this messenger comes, he is bringing fire and fullers' soap, which is a strong, lye based soap that makes linen exceptionally clean. This messenger is coming to take the priests of Levi and put them through the refiners fire and wash them clean with the fullers' soap of purification so that these priests will no longer be crooked but get straight so that they can offer right sacrifices again, as in days of old, as in former years. Then, once the priesthood has their act together, and everything is made right, everything in the Temple is prepared, then the Lord will appear suddenly for judgment. Look what we find in Malachi 3:5; "Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien (do you hear this?), and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts." For the oppressed workers, widows, orphans, and immigrants of the day this is good news, the hopeful expectation that once the priests get it together, finish their preparations, and offer right sacrifices, that the Lord will come back and deliver justice.

Then we have John the Baptist, out in the wilderness, receiving a word from the Lord. The word of God doesn't come to the emperor Tiberius. It doesn't come to Pontius Pilate the governor, or Herod, or Phillip or Lysanias the civic rulers. The word of God doesn't come to Annas and Caiaphas the high priests. The word of God does not go to the places of power and influence. No, the word of God comes to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. His is the voice crying out in the wilderness that now is the time to prepare the way of the Lord, to make the paths straight, to fill up the valleys and lower the mountains and hills, to smooth over the rough places, to remove every barrier and

obstacle so that all flesh can see the salvation of God. There is preparation to be made, a baptism of repentance to be received for the forgiveness of sins. Preparations must be made so that all is ready when the Lord returns, the God of our salvation. Next week we are going to get more into the details of what is involved in these preparations. But I will give you a hint. Just as Malachi makes it clear that the priesthood needs to get their act together, so John's message says to all who hear the sound of his voice to bear fruits worthy of repentance. John doesn't limit this to the priesthood. He doesn't just call out the oppressors of his day, those who knowingly or unknowingly inflict injustice on the widow, the orphan, the immigrant and migrant in their midst, but John calls everyone to change their ways, to repent, to receive their forgiveness, and then live right so that when the Lord comes, he will be pleased with what he sees, a people who are prepared to stand in his glorious presence. We have work to do.

What preparations need to be done before Christmas arrives? My wife is a master at planning and preparation. She started back in October buying presents for the whole family, including our nieces and nephews. I just have to worry about getting stuff for her. I get off easy. We already have our presents wrapped. If you don't have your Christmas decorations up by now you better get moving. Can't promise you warm weather any more if you have outdoor decorations to put up yet. Maybe you have already had some holiday parties but have one or two more to get ready for. Those Christmas cards need stuffed in envelopes, stamped and taken to the post office. There are still rehearsals ahead for those of us who will be participating in holiday concerts. Maybe you have to prepare to head out to visit family in the next few weeks. Have you planned your Christmas dinner yet? So much planning and preparation we find ourselves in during this season of Advent, a time of expectant

waiting for the coming of our Lord and Savior as an infant lying in a manger.

But before we can get to sweet baby Jesus we have to go through John the Baptist. His voice still cries out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord so that all flesh can see the salvation of God. What preparations need to be done so that all people can see the salvation of God? The messenger from Malachi says that there needs to be a refinement and purification. John says there needs to be repentance. I wonder what obstacles need to be removed, what crooked roads need straightened, what rough places need smoothed so that people will be able to see the salvation of God. What are we doing or not doing that prevents people from seeing Jesus? Are you and I prepared for the coming of the Lord? I don't know about you but when I consider my life, I know there is need for refinement and purification. I need some refiners' fire and some fullers' soap. There are some things of which I need to repent. I need to recognize the ways in which my lifestyle is carried on the backs of oppressed workers, widows, orphans, and migrants. And I don't believe I am alone in this. As we prepare for our annual celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ our Savior, let us also hear the voice of John crying out in today's wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. Let us hear that cry as a clarion call for action, knowing that now is the time, knowing that we *have time*, to repent, to change our ways of living, to straighten ourselves out, to smooth our rough edges, to receive forgiveness, and bear the fruits of repentance. We have time. So let's make the most of it.