**Malachi 3:1-4**

**1** "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

**2** But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. **3** He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, **4** and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

## Luke 1:68-79 The song of Zechariah

 **68**"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,   
      because he has come and has redeemed his people.   
 **69**He has raised up a horn of salvation for us   
      in the house of his servant David   
 **70**(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),   
 **71**salvation from our enemies   
      and from the hand of all who hate us—   
 **72**to show mercy to our fathers   
      and to remember his holy covenant,   
 **73**the oath he swore to our father Abraham:   
 **74**to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,   
      and to enable us to serve him without fear   
 **75**in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.   
 **76**And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;   
      for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,   
 **77**to give his people the knowledge of salvation   
      through the forgiveness of their sins,   
 **78**because of the tender mercy of our God,   
      by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven   
 **79**to shine on those living in darkness   
      and in the shadow of death,   
   to guide our feet into the path of peace."

## Luke 3:1-6

**1**In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— **2**during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. **3**He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **4**As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:   
   "A voice of one calling in the desert,   
   'Prepare the way for the Lord,   
      make straight paths for him.   
 **5**Every valley shall be filled in,   
      every mountain and hill made low.   
   The crooked roads shall become straight,   
      the rough ways smooth.   
 **6**And all mankind will see God's salvation.'

“Preparing for the Gift of Grace”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

December 5, 2021

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

There are things that happen at a certain time, whose importance rests on that particular moment. There are things that happen as if in a chronological vacuum, whose meaning rests not on when they occur, but on the way they last. There are also events whose importance and meaning rest on the fact that they are located in a very specific place and time, and also on their durability; on their enduring truth. Certainly, Jesus’ birth is one of the latter events. It’s interesting to note as well, that Luke’s Gospel pays particular attention to the time and place of John’s birth and preaching, as if daring anyone to question the historical nature of his ministry or his prophecy.

The tie to the political figures of the day may be important to some people as the verification of John’s words. For others, and particularly for the Jews among his hearers, John’s recalling the words of the prophet Isaiah would have made them take notice. Can you imagine what it must have felt like to them? For many hundreds of years, they had awaited the promised salvation. *Could it be now? Could our Messiah be coming?* ***Could it be now? Could our Messiah be coming?*** Dear God, could it be now? Is our Messiah coming? What in the world can we possibly do to be ready?

There is a wonderful quotation from C.S. Lewis that I think can be a good image for us to carry through this Advent season. He wrote, “We cannot be just an ordinary egg...we must be hatched or go bad."Oh, but Mr. Lewis, how do we go about being hatched? In a way, and I am very grateful for this, we don’t have anything to do with our hatching. It is by God’s grace that we are given life, and by God’s grace that we are given new life in Christ. We can live our lives in ignorance of grace, denying its presence or ignoring its significance. Or, we can open our eyes and our hearts to God’s many gifts and crack open the egg of our indifference. This is Advent. We are waiting for the *incarnation* of God, who came to us in the infant Jesus to teach us to love and to live eternally. Wow!

I am aware, though, that for so many of us the difficulty of making ourselves ready for this promised coming, God with us, still catches us off guard. We want to be able to work our way up to Christmas in a manner similar to preparing for exchanging gifts. We want someone to open the doors early on the day after Thanksgiving and walk right in. God’s love is a gift that is present each day of the year, though, but it sometimes takes the hanging of wreathes on our doors to make us remember it. The blinders we have on to the sense of Emmanuel, God with us, can be quite thick at times. I think that at times, what makes us unable to know God’s presence is our own strong wills and disbelief. We know that we do things that displease God, and we know that we live with disappointments. Our blinders become walls that keep God and even other people from getting inside, and our response can be increasing isolation. This cycle seems even more pronounced during this time of Covid, in which the walls are physical—are even our own homes.

One of my favorite theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was a man committed to his faith, who lived out his commitment in opposition to Hitler and the Nazi party in his homeland of Germany during World War II. Knowing that he was imprisoned and eventually killed for this open opposition makes his description of Advent especially poignant to me. “A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes--and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent.” To think of ourselves as imprisoned may make us tremendously uncomfortable, and it probably should. We *are* imprisoned—by our anxieties, by our greed, by our distrust of others and by our inability to trust God.

Even within this prison of waiting, this prison of doubt, the good news of God’s grace is this: God’s grace comes to us unbidden, undeserved. I’d like you to remember the image of the egg again. We can hatch or go bad, and our hatching is not up to us. A mother hen sits on her egg, warming it until its time has come to open. Our loving, Creator God offers us loving Grace, love we can think of as offering us the warmth by which we can be born to newness. What, then, can we *do* during this Advent season to make ourselves ready for Christ’s coming again? We can’t read John’s prophecy without hearing in it certain warning. Kate Huey is a United Church of Christ minister who for years wrote a weekly response to scripture called “Weekly Seeds.” Reflecting on our second passage from Luke today, she writes, "The prophet warns Israel about God's judgment and promises God's salvation. Both the warning and the promise are conditional. They depend upon the free response of the people of Israel." John's message of both warning and promise is meant "to persuade the people to change or repent. Every prophet appealed for conversion."

Advent isn’t only a time to think about shopping, though our consumer culture would have us believe this to be so. During Advent, we are invited to consider the things that separate us from God and from each other and to do something about it. I hope you hear an invitation this morning to examine your lives and to anticipate what might make you ready for hatching. Don’t be afraid: We are wrapped in God’s loving Grace. From within this warm parental comfort, we are asked to live into the invitation to new life in Christ. From within this warm and loving protection, we begin to chip away at the barriers we have erected. You might think of an egg tooth now. We have been given the tools to open our lives from within, in order to meet the gifts of God. We have been given Jesus, in whom small cracks first arise in our thickened barriers, and by which our hearts eventually open in the fullness of resurrected life.

I didn’t know until this week that it takes fully three weeks of incubation for an egg to hatch. Did you know that? I found myself thinking about the days it takes for the chick to leave its protective shell, knowing that the process is gradual, and that its eventual opening into the world must be stunning. We are waiting for Jesus’ coming into our lives, and the arrival will be stunning! Are we ready? Dear God, what can we do to be ready for our Christ? How can we show God that we are sorry for what we have done to distance ourselves from God and others, and how can we turn *toward* God? Thankfully, we don’t have to do everything at once. Life changes occur over time. We shouldn’t wait to begin, but we also need to remember that we are not alone in the process of turning to God. We are partnered with a loving parent who meets us more than halfway. Trusting in God’s guidance and in the presence of the Holy Spirit, we can examine where and who we are, and we can move forward into new life in Christ. When we do, when we make a choice to turn toward the Light and the Love that are coming once again, we also become those who make the path straight for others. *Loving* fully, we can’t help but look to help others to *live* fully. We have been looking at how blessed we are to be able to help others through the Dolly Fisher Fund, grateful for the many people, both members of this church and others who support it; we have been seeking ways to make our giving even more abundant so that others also may understand God’s grace to be abundant. How are we able to make others’ rough places plain? How do we help others to know with certainty that God is with them? How do we do this so that *this moment,* that *this time* is a time of blessing for someone else?

From within *our* waiting; from within our expectation, we look to Christ to come again this Christmas. During this Advent, may we welcome Jesus to be our guiding light and our hope to experience the fullness of God’s grace. We do not journey alone. Amen