

“THE FEAR OF HOME”

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Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6

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When I first moved away from home to attend school in Toronto my father told me, no matter where you are, always come home for Christmas. I’ve always tried and whenever I do, it’s always been a happy, joyous time. I have a rather large extended family in Calgary, and the Christmas season always promises great food, reunions and a lot of fun. I’ve been blessed with a wonderful family, great parents and a brother I get along with, who always lets me beat him at golf.

But homecoming isn’t always that way for many other people. Some people haven’t been home in years. For some the thought of returning home brings up memories of painful times. There are those who fear going home, returning to a place of abuse, hurt and neglect. **Our families of origin can be breeding grounds of dysfunction and there’s great truth in the saying that you can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family.** So, it’s not surprising that for some once they leave home, they never desire to return. **Home can be a difficult place for some.**

The Israelites of the time of the prophet Malachi would have found returning home to have been difficult. The people of Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians around 587 BC. Then 50 years later they were allowed to return home to Jerusalem and subsequently they rebuilt the Temple and the walls of the city. But as time passed, Jerusalem and Israel had not been restored to their former glory under the likes of David and Solomon. *No longer trusting God’s justice and doubting his covenant love, these post-exilic Jews began to lose hope. Their worship degenerated into a listless perpetuation of mere form, and they no longer took the law seriously: tithes were ignored, the Sabbath was broken, intermarriage with pagans was common, and the priests were corrupt. Worst of all God had not returned to his Temple with the kind of majesty and power that would exalt his Kingdom in the sight of the nations. Israel was just a small province in the backwaters of the Persian Empire, a pale shadow of the mighty Kingdom she had been under David. That seemed all wrong to Israel, so they incessantly whined, “Where is the God of justice?”¹*

Home was not what they had hoped for, what they had expected. They complained to God, why was returning home so difficult? God heard their complaints. The prophet Malachi says to the people, you have wearied the Lord with your words. *“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way for me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The*

¹ Stan Mast, *Center for Excellence in Preaching*, December 9, 2018

*messenger of the covenant... is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 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 fuller's soap, he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendant of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.***

If we Christians understand the prophecy of the one who is coming, who will refine and purify, to refer to Jesus, then we also must understand that Jesus comes, **not only to comfort the complainers, but also to call them to righteousness, to repentance.** And the one who is sent to prepare the way for the Lord is the figure of John, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ***"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."***

Home isn't always what we hope it would be and the road home is always under construction according to John. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Valleys need to be filled, mountains need to be made low, the crooked needs straightening out and the rough ways are to be made smooth. **If we want our experience of home to be one of peace, then work needs to be done. And some of that work needs to be done by us.**

John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. For the Israelites of the time of Malachi, their frustration with what seemed to be the lack of the presence of the God of justice was largely of their own making. In their impatience, they chose to abandon their hope, the ways of their faith and they instead blamed others, they blamed God. **What they failed to recognize was their need for repentance.**

A sister returns home for the first time in years when she hears of the death of her mother. Her brother has stayed near home all that time. They're not as close as they should be and there are things in their past that have pushed them apart. The brother stands to inherit most of the estate. The sister has always blamed the brother for defending a dysfunctional family, for his always seeking to protect the honour of the family, even when it hurt her, even when it pushed her away. He blames her for running away, for escaping and leaving him to deal with everything. And now they're together again for the funeral but the old hurts surface quickly, and neither is ready to forgive the other. When the funeral is over the siblings part again, without reconciliation, because neither has been open to repentance.

Metanoia, that's the Greek word for repentance and it means a turning, a change of mind, a recognition of sin and sorrow for it. To repent is to make a robust change, a significant turn. It's not about cosmetic changes, like stuffing all the dirty clothes under the bed when company comes over, **but rather about real change, costly change, change that results in different choices and actions.** Sometimes the change doesn't have to be huge or profound, sometimes it can be just a small change, a minor course correction. But over time, over the length of our lives, a small adjustment now can lead to a profound change in the long-term trajectories of

where we're headed. **But the thing with repentance is this, you can't wait for someone else to begin, it needs to begin with us.**

If you listen to the gospel reading again from Luke, listen to who gets mentioned. *"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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."* Emperors, governors, rulers, high priests, people of position, power and privilege. **And yet the word of God did not come to them, but rather to a wild man, living in the wilderness, clothed in camel's hair and eating bugs!**

The word of God comes to us, to people like you and me, ordinary, unassuming, not particularly powerful or privileged, but a people who God believes can play a role in preparing the way, **a people who can join the work of kingdom construction.** I know a guy who owns a custom home building company called Kingdom Builders. Great name for a home building company, **but really, isn't it the business all God's people should be in?**

The road home is always under construction and the work is hard, but it's worth the journey. Whether home is a place where estrangement needs to be exchanged for reconciliation, where hurt needs to be addressed with forgiveness, where disappointments of the past need to be replaced by new memories and hopeful initiatives, **or whether home is more about the heart, a place of connection with God that has grown distant or been polluted by guilt and fear, the way back home is hard work but it is absolutely necessary and it begins with our repentance.**

That repentance, that turning, is needed in your life and my life **but it's also needed in the life of the church.** When the church tells people that preparing the way of the Lord is all about living your best life now, when the church defends the status quo because we don't want to make waves, when the church remains silent on the hard issues of the day, like the truth that needs to be heard so that reconciliation with Indigenous people can occur, like the uncomfortable reality of discrimination that still occurs in our midst, like what it will cost us to truly be faithful stewards of God's creation, when we won't undertake the hard work of filling valleys and lowering mountains, straightening the crooked and smoothing the rough ways, how are we undertaking the call as kingdom builders?

What needs to change in your life, in our lives? What do we as a church need to repent of? What would true repentance cost us if it is to be more than just cosmetic changes? I know that to honestly contemplate the change we need to undergo is difficult and it can be frightening. **Why do it? Why not just be respectable, quiet, not rock the boat?**

Nobody would know. And isn't that exactly the problem? When we as the people of God won't undertake the hard work of repentance, of costly change, of kingdom construction, **nobody will know what we stand for, why we should matter, why people need Jesus at all!**

Friends, this Advent, we need to turn, to change direction, to repent, to head for home and to come to know that we need not fear. We need not fear because while we are called to participate in the construction of the kingdom, **the promise is that it will get done.** *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, and all flesh **shall** see the salvation of God.* We have seen that salvation in Jesus. Born in a stable in Bethlehem, crucified to a cross outside Jerusalem, buried in a tomb, but it could not hold him, death could not keep him, darkness could not overcome him. **And we repent because we know that in him, we have seen the salvation of God.**

There's a poem by the African American poet Robert Hayden called, **"Those Winter Sundays."** It's a poem Hayden wrote for his foster-father, a Baptist man who made it possible for Hayden to get an education. ***Sundays too my father got up early and put his clothes on in the blue-black cold, then with cracked hands that ached from labor in the weekday weather made banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.***

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking. When the rooms were warm, he'd call, and slowly I would rise and dress, fearing the chronic angers of that house, Speaking indifferently to him, who had driven out the cold and polished my good shoes as well. What did I know, what did I know of love's austere and lonely offices?

In an interview after reading the poem, Hayden reflects, "What hurts is that he never lived to know that I cared that much." **My friends, what do we know of love's austere and lonely offices?** The good news of the gospel is that we **have** known that love and that love invites us to his table this morning to be nourished, to be strengthened, to commune with him and with each other, **so that as a people of repentance and forgiveness, we will not fear and so that we can engage in building the kingdom that he will bring to completion.**

The table is ready, come!

Thanks be to God.