

We Get What We Prepare For

Second Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:1-6 Malachi 3:1-4 Rev. Todd B. Freeman
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa December 6, 2009

I'm sure you are all familiar with the saying, "**You get what you pay for.**" While higher priced items don't always mean a better quality product, oftentimes it does.

I've been wondering this week if a similar principle might be involved with the statement, "**You get what you prepare for.**" Think with me for a moment. Recall those events in your life that you have worked the hardest to prepare for. Did you find that all that preparation necessary?

For instance, did you ever have to play a musical instrument or sing or dance in a recital? Was preparation necessary? Was preparation necessary before playing a team or individual sport? Was it necessary to prepare for a really big exam? Were you ever on stage in a play, or in front of a crowd to give a speech, or a really important presentation at work? Let's broaden that a bit. Would you say it's necessary to prepare children for adolescence and adulthood? What role does preparation play in a good marriage or partnership?

Is it not often the case that the success or failure of many of our endeavors in life is directly related to how well we prepare?

I was in the Boy Scouts when I was young, an endeavor that took much preparation before I eventually reached the rank of Eagle Scout. The scout motto is simple and clear: Be Prepared. I must confess that I often take that motto a little too close to heart, sometimes obsessing over being prepared. But when I don't feel prepared for something my stress level always rises. And when I am prepared I'm much more relaxed and things just seem to flow more smoothly.

I would suspect the same is true for most of you. Therefore, I suggest that the statement, "You get what you prepare for," is often true. Please note, however, that I'm not for a moment suggesting that if something bad or tragic or unforeseen happens that it is necessarily a result of poor preparation. That's something completely different. Rather, I'm saying that **there are some things in life that cannot be achieved unless there is intentional preparation.**

If you agree in principle with all this so far, then let me project this one step further. **Might there be a correlation with the notion "You get what you prepare for," in connection with your spiritual lives?** Does a meaningful spiritual life, like the living of life itself, require any preparation? Is it something we need to work at and be intentional about? Does living life as a Christian entail any deliberate preparation or learning?

I would suggest it does. I base this, in part, upon my experience as a pastor and upon my own spiritual journey of faith. I also base this, in part, on the biblical story of **John the Baptist**. The early Christian community believed that John was the one who fulfilled certain Hebrew Old Testament prophecies.

Around 400 B.C.E. a prophet records in the book of Malachi, "Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to God's temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts."

As an aside, the Hebrew for "my messenger" is the word *malachi* from which this book gets its name. Therefore, "Malachi" most likely may not be the name of the prophet himself. You may be more familiar with the Greek word for messenger, *angelos*, or angel.

In the New Testament gospel of Luke, the author includes the actual text from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, "The voice of the one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord."

So again I ask, **is it necessary for some kind of preparation to take place in our lives before we can most effectively live a life of faith?** At its most basic level, I think the answer is, **yes**. Why? Because preparing the way of the Lord in our lives makes it possible for us to more easily recognize the presence of God working in and through our lives, and in and through the lives of others, including this congregation.

Well, if you're *still* with me on this line of thinking, then the next step is to **explore what it is we might do to prepare the way of the Lord**. For some that means clenching a Bible in one hand, pointing a finger with the other, all the while standing out on a street corner screaming to passers by that they are going to burn in hell if they don't accept the same understanding of Jesus and God that they have.

Thank goodness Presbyterians, at least vast the majority of us, see preparing the way for the Lord quite a bit differently.

Our passage from Luke, again quoting from the prophet Isaiah, provides us some very good guidance. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the paths, every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low." But what's that supposed to mean?

In ancient times, when a king made a journey, a messenger was sent ahead to announce his coming. In order to prepare for that visit, roads often had to be built where there were none. Therefore, just as today, valleys had to be filled and hills cut into. And the existing roads were usually in such terrible shape and disrepair that they had to be either straightened where they became too crooked, or smoothed where they were too rough.

Prophets used this road-building analogy and metaphor to announce what had to be done in a spiritual sense for the coming of the One who would reveal God to the people as never before.

John the Baptist's message was: The King of all kings is coming! So prepare the way! But **instead of mending the roads, mend your hearts and your lives!** John uses the word **repentance**, which simply means a turning away from harmful, unjust, selfish, and sinful ways, and taking on loving, just, and mutually affirming ways.

I would like each of you to now apply that road construction metaphor to yourself.

- **What are the valleys in your life that need to be filled?**
- **Which mountains in your life need to be leveled?**
- **What rough places in your life need to be made smooth?**
- **What crooked pathways in your life need to be straightened out?**

The same questions can be asked and applied to us as a congregation. Here are some suggestions. Fill up the **valleys of poverty**; pull down the **mountains of privilege, selfishness, and greed**. Or this one. Fill up the **valleys of ignorance**; bring down the **mountains and hills of stubborn prejudice, pride and judgmentalism**. We could go on and on naming these kinds of valleys and mountains.

So by saying, "prepare the way of the Lord," there has always been an assumption that there was and is a particular "way" of God. While we will never be able to always discern the "will" of God, I think there is indeed a particular "way" of God.

That "way" involves treating others as equals, sharing with those in need, learning to experience others in mutual, ethical, mature, and love-based relationships. And God's "way" is certainly a path of justice for all people. Therefore, **any time we participate in an activity or attitude that leads to living life more fully, justly, and lovingly – for ourselves and others – we are preparing a way for the Lord.** That's what it means to be a faithful citizen in the Kingdom of God.

So do we get what we prepare for? If the answer is yes, then how do you, how do we, need to prepare during this season of Advent?

Amen.