

Scripture

Malachi 3:1–4

The Coming Messenger

3 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 2 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 fullers' soap; 3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 1:68–79

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
78 By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Luke 3:1–6

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

3 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, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
5 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;
6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Sermon

There was something very unusual in the lectionary readings this week. The usual Sunday morning line up consists of a reading from the Hebrew Testament, some poetry or prayer from the Psalms, something from the early church letters, and a reading from one of the four gospels – the stories of Jesus’ life and teachings.

This week there was no psalm, and two readings from the gospel of Luke, though neither one of them were about Jesus directly. The first was kind of a combination of prophecy, prayer, and blessing by Zechariah; the second was a similar kind of declaration by John the Baptist.

The two appear together in this morning’s readings because they are related. Zechariah was John’s father.

You may remember Zechariah – he was a priest – an older priest. One day, as he was in God’s sanctuary tending to the incense, an angel appeared to him and told him that he and his wife Elizabeth would bear a son.

Naturally, Zechariah’s response was incredulity; ‘How can this be? I’m an old man – and my wife’s no spring chicken either.’ Now, we’ve heard this story before – it sounds quite similar to what happened to Abram and Sarah many centuries earlier when they were promised a son in their old age.

But in this story, the angel Gabriel was not impressed with Zechariah’s lack of faith and so closed his brazen mouth up, causing him to be mute because of his transgression.

In due time, Zechariah’s wife Elizabeth bore a son and named him John as the angel had instructed. At that point, Zechariah’s lips were loosened and he burst forth with the song of prayer and blessing that we heard this morning.

In that song he praised God, prophesying that the time that the ancient prophets spoke of was about to dawn, that God was right now raising up a mighty saviour to fulfil his promises to rescue his people so that they might serve him without fear.

Zechariah spoke to his son as well, declaring that he would grow to be a prophet who would go before the Lord to prepare his way as the angel had said; that he would give light to those who sit in darkness.

When the time was right John did just that. Most of us will be familiar with the speech of John that we heard this morning, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
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.’

Certainly, John had taken the words of his father to heart, and was doing his best to prepare the way for the Lord.

There is a particular detail that I would like to focus on this morning – it may seem at first like a minor detail, but I think it makes all the difference in the world.

We are familiar with the ideas of repentance and forgiveness. Commonly it goes like this: we repent, we rethink, we reconsider. We realize that what we have done is wrong.

Then we say that we are sorry, and will never do that thing again, sometimes we also do something to make amends, and once all of that has been done we hope for some kind of forgiveness – a validation that though we’ve done something wrong, that we are still ok people.

That is the repentance/forgiveness cycle – that is the pattern that we generally subscribe to. The problem is, it’s not quite what the bible teaches.

The model that I just spoke of – of repentance leading to forgiveness – would lead us to believe that forgiveness is a result of repentance – that repentance somehow causes forgiveness.

If that were true, that would mean that forgiveness is something we earn. We put in a few tears, some regret, and a couple of well-meaning but ultimately empty promises, and out pops forgiveness.

This idea of somehow earning God’s grace ought to be setting off the warning bells in our heads – something can’t be quite right. We don’t put God in our debt by our actions so that he somehow owes us forgiveness because we said or did the prescribed things. Forgiveness has to be more than just a gumball from a machine.

Not only does this understanding place us somehow in charge of God, relegating him to being a responsive puppet, it also places human agency at the center of forgiveness. What I mean by this is

that we have to start the process. If we don't decide on our own to repent, there can be no forgiveness.

To me, this is problematic for two reasons. One – my natural inclination is not to be repentant. To repent means to rethink, and how often do we do that? If we're going to be honest with ourselves, most of us think we are right most of the time. There is no need to rethink past actions – we were in the right, others were wrong obviously, otherwise we would have said or done something different at the time. Repentance does not come naturally to most of us.

Aside from our general unwillingness to repent, there is the issue of sheer volume. I simply am not capable of repenting of all the things I have done wrong, or mistakes that I have made. I lived thirty years before learning to pray, I certainly can't remember all my past transgressions. I've got a backlog that is impossible to deal with.

I also have trouble just keeping up with each current day. Some sins don't even register – a curt word, choosing to walk by someone I could be helping – things I do without really being aware even.

If it is up to me to instigate the process of grace by repenting, if I have to start this whole forgiveness ball rolling, then most of my sin will remain unforgiven. Either I thought I was in the right and have no need to repent, or those sins have all been lost to time and memory. In any case, I remain only partially forgiven, which really works out to no forgiveness at all.

It can't be up to me. No sane God would leave me in charge of my own salvation. Certainly not a loving God, who really wants what's best for me.

What we find in the bible, and in this morning's readings, is thankfully a little different. Zechariah's charge to his son said that he would go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

I don't see anything in here about repentance. John's mission from his father was to tell the people that they were saved and forgiven. Full stop. Saved and forgiven.

In this morning's second reading, Luke wrote that John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. A quick reading might lead us back to the idea of earning forgiveness – if we repent for forgiveness.

This word translated as for in this sentence is more often translated as into – repent into forgiveness. That would suggest that the forgiveness is pre-existing. John called people to be baptized into an already waiting forgiveness.

Is this true? Does forgiveness come first? The over-all arc of the bible supports that theory. In most of the bible humanity trundles along, largely oblivious, just thinking about what might be for dinner.

The whole bible is a series of stories about God coming to people – not the other way around. God came to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God came to Moses. God brought his people out of Egypt. Time after time God came to humans and called them into something greater than they were – it's an established pattern.

And let's not forget the biggest story of God coming to humanity – we are in Advent after all. Jesus being born is the fullest expression of God coming to us. Jesus' mission was to declare the presence of the kingdom of God. The forgiving, peaceable kingdom of grace.

Before you were born, Jesus' salvific work of forgiveness was already accomplished. God's grace precedes you and I. Forgiveness has been waiting before we ever stuttered out any kind of prayer of repentance.

So, why do I think this makes any difference? Is this like asking how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?

Let me ask you – do we repent to seek forgiveness, or do we repent because forgiveness has already sought and found us?

The first case, of people repenting seeking forgiveness, brings to mind images of groveling, fear, and penance – people seeking to appease an angry God, desperately trying to find things to be sorry for to ensure they don't forget anything and so miss out on heavenly salvation.

The second case, that we repent because we have already been forgiven, paints a picture of gratitude, joy, and welcome. Which picture seems more representative of the kind of kingdom a God who is willing to die for us is trying to create?

We repent in gratitude because God loves us, not to make God love us. We love, because God first loved us. God extends peace to us - repentance is our response.

Does this mean that unrepentant people are also forgiven? Yes and no. Those who do not repent have forgiveness offered, but not received. We often speak of the transformative power of God – repentance is key to letting God in to do that transformation. We cannot be transformed if we go through life thinking that we already have everything figured out and that we are always right. There is no possibility for growth with that kind of attitude.

God so loved the *whole* world, that he gave his only Son. Forgiveness is a gift freely offered. Abundantly offered.

Placing forgiveness as a gift offered to all for nothing does not cheapen or devalue that forgiveness as some may think. In fact, the opposite is true. If we consider forgiveness to be God's programmed response to human initiative – that is cheap grace.

Forgiveness freely offered prompts us to respond by also being free and generous – with our love, our acceptance of others, our time, our finances. Forgiveness freely offered gives us the confidence to love others as God has loved us. Without reservation.

You are already a forgiven people. Not people seeking forgiveness. You are already made whole in Christ. Your repentance, your rethinking, is not penance, but growth. Transformation.

Just as the Christ child is the new kingdom being born into the old world, your repentance is a sign of the new you casting out the old.

In Christ you are forgiven. Live in peace with God, and with one another.

Amen.