



Have you noticed that during Advent—as in Lent—our worship begins differently than during the rest of the year? In Advent, we start with the penitential order, where the Confession and Absolution are moved to the beginning of the service. This is how our worship reminds us that our Advent task is to prepare for Christ’s birth by examining our lives and making right the things that may have gotten out of balance, out of kilter.

Does the need for repentance depress you? Or do the shortest days of the year as we approach the winter solstice draw you into darkness? If so, you need not fear; the coming of the Lord is a joyous event, an event that at least two of the prophets and one gospel writer called, “the dawn from on high,” the coming of the Messiah who dispels the darkness with his compassion and ushers us into the way of peace.

We will get to the “dawn from on high” today, but the path that leads there goes via our Advent task of repentance. In our first lesson today, the prophet Malachi foretold this Advent task. Malachi prophesied the future coming of the Messiah and instructed the people to prepare in this way. He didn’t say our Advent task is “Confession and Absolution;” he called it, “renewing [our] covenant with God.”

Whatever you call it, looking within and doing what is necessary to restore our relationship with God is a classic Advent task. Only Advent hadn’t come to pass in Malachi’s time, not yet. Malachi’s time was some four or five hundred years before the coming of Christ. Malachi’s time was just after the people had been restored to their property from exile and they had rebuilt and consecrated their Temple. What they had longed for—fervently prayed for—had come to pass. They were home and they had their own place in which to worship. But things just weren’t what they used to be.

After looking around for someone to blame, the people had noticed that their priests weren’t performing the rituals in the way they had done in the old temple. Into this mess appeared Malachi, whose name means, “My messenger.” Presumably, Malachi the Prophet was God’s messenger, although

many wonder if Malachi might also have been someone else's messenger, maybe the priests' messenger, because Malachi did not condemn them.

Instead, Malachi lowered the boom on everyone, on priests and people alike (as prophets do). Malachi had asked priests and people alike whether THEY, individually, were keeping the Covenant with God.

Malachi shared the very good news that the people were getting what they had longed for: Not only did they have a new Temple in which to worship, "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple," Malachi told them.

The Lord God is coming! Who doesn't want God to appear in their house? Especially if God comes into the Temple that they have built for him. Won't the Lord's coming put all things right?

Yes! But Malachi's warning is that no one will be unaffected when the Lord appears. Malachi's answer to the people's discontent was that everyone should look within to ensure THEIR lives were right with God. "You do you," as my fitness instructor advises. We must look within to assess our spiritual life and repair what is necessary. After all, the Lord God is coming; preparation is required.

There's two parts to Malachi's message: God is coming into his Temple, and there will be a messenger to signal God's coming. Turns out, the messenger that Malachi prophesied was John the Baptist, the voice crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord."

Well, actually, what John cried out most was "Repent!" which is the universal prescription of preparation for God's coming. We must examine our lives and repair the ways we are living in "wrong relationship" with God and with others—the way we are "living in darkness."

There is a connection between Malachi's prescription of "repentance" and our hope for our future. In a later chapter, channeling Isaiah, Malachi equates what he calls the "breaking of the dawn from on high" with the coming of the Messiah. The "breaking of the dawn from on high" will dispel the darkness in which we find ourselves.

In our gospel lesson today, Luke also picks up the "dawn from on high" thread from Isaiah and Malachi and further equates that dawn with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Luke said that the "dawn from on high" would give light to us, who "sit in darkness" in "the shadow of death." Luke says that John the Baptist would prepare the way for Jesus Christ, the "dawn from on high" who would become incarnate to communicate the "tender compassion" of God to all of us, to usher in the beginning of a brand-new day for all those "who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death."

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Let me ask you—is there some way in which you are dwelling in darkness today? Perhaps the pandemic that just won't end is darkness enough for all of us. Or perhaps, like the psalmist (88:19) who wrote, “Darkness is my only companion,” darkness has been with you longer than just the pandemic.

It is in these dark places where we need “the dawn from on high,” and the “tender compassion of our God,” which Luke says will “lead us into the way of peace.” There it is: the culmination of our Advent task is to let Christ Jesus guide us into his way of peace. You just knew that the God of love would preach “peace.” Today's lessons remind us that preparation is required, but that the outcome is full of compassion and peace.

Don't rush ahead. Christ is coming anew into his Temple. How will you prepare for the coming of the Lord?