

"THE UN-CHRISTMAS #2: THE UNSUNG GIFT"

(Malachi 3:1-4; Mark 1:1-5)

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**[PROP NEEDED: 5-6 volunteers for "Vacuum Cleaner Brigade"]**

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 12-11-22]

--I--

1. **[BOTH Services (CEB)]** [Advent Candle Reading: Malachi 3:1-4]  
**[11am ONLY...]** Read Main Scripture Text: Mark 1:1-5
  
2. It was Tuesday, June 2, 1953. Elizabeth II was about to be crowned Queen of England in an elaborate ceremony in London's great Westminster Abbey. And though the Queen-to-be had not yet appeared, all the guests were present and seated. Everything -- it seemed -- was ready for the entrance of the Queen's entourage.  
 But just before that grand entrance, something happened that might have seemed unusual to anyone who'd never seen a British coronation before... ***[VACUUM BRIGADE "INTERRUPTS" TO VACUUM SANCTUARY FOR ABOUT 20-30 SECONDS...]***  
 Now, the well-dressed squad of royal cleaners that guests saw that day before the Queen-to-be's entrance was not a mistake or joke, but was actually part of a long-standing custom which insisted that everything in the coronation hall must be absolutely clean and prepared for the arrival of the new monarch.
  
3. If you think about it, this is not too unlike many of the customs we have today.  
 A--I mean, when we know special company is coming, who among us doesn't go about the house, frantically picking up and cleaning so that it all looks at its best?  
 B--And what business person -- when we know that our boss will be with us -- doesn't go about checking their facts and figures to make sure that everything is in order?  
 C--And when we're Christmas approaches, who among us doesn't prepare by decorating our house and/or yard with a Christmas tree, lights, wreaths, and so on?  
 D--My point, you see, is that *when something special is happening*, we take time to *prepare and get ready for it*, don't we?
  
4. Well, today as we continue our Advent series "**UN-Christmas**", we're focusing on a particular "*UnSung (and Unexpected) Gift*" that tends to get overlooked in our secular preparations for the holiday, but one that (in fact) is probably one of the *greatest* gifts we can give and receive.
  
5. We find it highlighted in today's two scripture readings -- Malachi 3 (the Advent Wreath reading) and today's second text from Mark 1:-5.

A--[9am ONLY... Listen to the words of Mark: "*1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son, 2 happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah: 'Look, I am sending my messenger before you. He will prepare your way, 3 a voice shouting in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.' 4 John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts & lives & wanted God to forgive their sins. 5 Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins.'*"]

B--[**BOTH services...**] Now, both of these texts announce that something special was about to happen on earth, so people needed to prepare and get ready for it.

C--Back in the time of the Hebrew prophets, when a king proposed to make a tour of his country, the custom was to send out couriers several days in front of the royal procession in order to tell the people to repair the roads in their area for the king's entourage to pass over -- they were (literally) to "*prepare the way for the Lord*" and "*make his paths straight*", as Verses 2 & 3 of the Mark passage say.

D--In today's context, though, the "*preparation*" that these texts speak of is *not* a literal preparation but a *spiritual* one -- a preparation *not* of roads, but of hearts and lives. <sup>1</sup>

E--So, the question for us today is: *How* do we "prepare/get ready" for the coming of Christmas? How do we "prepare the way" for Christ's coming into our hearts & lives?

--II--

6. Well, both of today's scriptures seem to say that the *best* way to prepare for Christmas -- to prepare for Christ to come into our hearts -- is not by purchasing something advertised on the internet or TV, but through a spiritual action that the Bible calls "**Repentance**." (what the CEB version of Vs.4 calls "*changing [our] hearts & lives*"). <sup>2</sup>

A--Of course, for many people today, the word "repentance" carries with it many negative connotations and images:

1--"Hellfire and damnation preaching," or stern-faced, pulpit-pounding TV evangelists intent on nothing but getting your money.

2--As a result, some of us may have even grown up thinking like the little boy, who was so tired of hearing sermons on repentance that he began referring to the church as the "*Repentagon*."

B--Yet, just because the word has been misused and abused doesn't mean that we can just ignore it. Instead, we need to reclaim its rightful meaning in and for our lives today.

7. In fact, the word "repent" itself simply means "to turn," and it refers to us consciously turning *away from* the ways of sin, and turning *back towards* the things of God.

A--I've heard it said that repentance is like the little boy who got his hand caught inside an expensive vase. His upset parents applied soap suds and cooking oil, without success. Finally, when they were so exasperated that the only thing they could do was break the vase, the boy asked, "*Would it help if I let go of the penny I'm holding onto?*"

B--You see, repentance is not really about hell, fear, or intimidation (like is often portrayed today), but simply about "letting go" of the *worldly* things in life, so that we can "take hold of" and experience the Godly/*spiritual* things of life -- after all, until we empty our lives of all that's *not* "of God," we'll never experience all that God *IS!* <sup>3</sup>

1--If you think about it, that effectively describes the ministry of John the Baptist, who Vs. 4 says was calling people to "*a baptism of repentance*" (or in CEB... "*calling people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins.*")

2--In effect, John was telling people: "*let go of/turn away from the things of this WORLD, so that you might take hold of the things of GOD.*"

C--You know, over the years, I've had habits and hangups that I've had to learn to "let go of" so that there would be room for *God* to come and truly live *in* and *through* me -- this wasn't always easy to do; sometimes it involved me asking for help; but when I did, God used it to help me become a better husband, better father, better pastor, ...a better Brian, period! (not better *than* others; just better than *I* was myself before!)

8. And that's why one good way to think of Repentance is like a ***Royal Housecleaning***.

A--Just as the British have a custom of cleaning Westminster Abbey before a coronation, and just as we might clean our house before company arrives, or decorate our house or church for Christmas,... so repentance is like the Holy Spirit going through the "house" of our souls, vacuuming and cleaning it of sin, so that it's ready for Jesus.

B--In the Advent Wreath reading from Malachi 3, God is described as a "*refiner's fire*" & a "*cleaner's/fuller's soap*," and that he would "*sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.*"

1--It might help to know that a refiner of metals sits & stirs the metal in a hot pot until all the impurities are boiled away, and the metal is left absolutely pure

2--And in similar fashion, a "*soap cleaner/fuller's*" job was to take colored cloth and bleach it until it was completely white.

C--So, in both scriptures describing John the Baptist, repentance is described as being like a "cleaning out" of all the garbage and impurities of our lives, so that only the purity of *God* remains.

9. So let me ask: what kind of "garbage" and "impurities" do you and I still have in our lives today that need to be "cleaned out"?

A--Is it a *bad* habit that you know you need to give up? Or maybe a *good* habit you know you need to take on?

B--Is it a grudge or unforgiveness you're holding against someone (or maybe even God)?

C--Is it a tendency to act *one* way at church with your *Christian* friends, and act a totally *different* way with other people everywhere *else*?

D--Or maybe is it pride that makes you think of yourself as better than others because of your income, your race, sexual preference, politics, religious beliefs, or something else? --...a selfish arrogance that makes you or me look down upon those who are *different* from us in some way?

10. I'm not here to judge, but I *am* here to point out that *each* of us has habits, attitudes, actions, and even *IN*actions that we need to repent of (even *after* we become Christians, because biblical repentance is NOT a *one-time* thing, but a *daily* practice!)

A--Each of us has *worldly* things that we regularly need to *let go of*, so that we can regularly *take on* the attitudes and ways *of God*.

B--Today's scriptures teach that part of Advent & Christmas involves us inviting God's Holy Spirit into our lives to do a *Royal Housecleaning* -- to spiritually "*prepare the way of the Lord*" through the spiritual action of **Repentance**.

C--When we think of great Christmas gifts, our culture -- in fact, most of *us*, as well -- don't think of "Repentance" being on the list.

D--But when we understand the grace and new life that Repentance makes possible, I hope we can see that, though it may be an "*UnSung (and Unexpected) Gift*," Repentance may, in fact, be one of the *greatest* Christmas gifts of all!

11. [PRAYER: "*Lord, we confess to you that there are things 'of the world' in our life that we need to 'give up' in order to fill our lives with more of you...*"]

### **ENDNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, the great English Bible scholar, once wrote "*There is laid on every one of us the perennial duty of seeking to make [our] lives fit for the [use of] the King*" (From his Commentary On Luke 3:1-6). Similarly, it's also been said that "*there is no Advent without preparation*" (I.E., No coming of Christ without taking the time to get ready for it).

<sup>2</sup> Author Hilary McDowell even goes so far as to say that "*without deep repentance, the journey to the stable [will be] in vain*" (Hilary McDowell, On the Way to Bethlehem, p. 46).

<sup>3</sup> The "*Works of the Flesh*" and "*Fruit of the Spirit*" described in Galatians 5 are a perfect example of this: There it says that until we get rid of such things as "*fornication, impurity, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarreling, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like*" (Gal.5:19-20) -- until we can repent ("turn from/let go of") these things, we'll never be able to really grow things like "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*" (Gal.5:22-23) in our lives.