

Malachi 3:1 - “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts.



Special Music: “Go Tell it on the Mountain” The Singing Contractors

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wE_eDDs7Qk

HE COMES

How long have we waited?

Frustrated, deflated

Listening to the cry in our ears

The promise to end all fears

Salvation anticipated

The rising of the son, dissipating chaos.

Will we see Him as promise confirmed,

The prophecies affirmed?

A new day dawning

Not leaving us wanting

The prophecy spurned

For something or someone else.

“Prepare the way of the Lord!”

A message that cannot, should not be ignored

“Make straight paths for him!”

Fill our cups to the brim

Sing a bright chord

As we celebrate the day of his coming

Just as God planned

Salvation's command

Born of the flesh

A breath of fresh

Air, truth is at hand

Pronouncing "A Child is born!"

News of grace

Born in this place

Of utility

A barn of humility

No evident trace

Of discord this silent and holy night.

He comes, the light of the world

He comes, glory unfurled

Perceptions are changed

Values arranged

Death is hurled

Into a place beyond darkness

And we are set free.

I have a birthmark behind my ear. Birthmarks are not that unusual, but mine, well, mine is special. You see, all the ministers on my mother's side of the family have "the mark" behind their ear. From the time that I was old enough to understand the words, I could hear my mother telling everyone that I was destined to be a preacher, because I had "the mark." Even as a young man, my mother continued to tell everybody about "the mark." All kinds of people, including total strangers, would have me come over to them and then they would bend my ear back to see "the mark." "Yep, there it is. This boy is going to be a preacher. No doubt about it."

I never minded having the mark. I was annoyed that so many people wanted to see it. I felt branded in some way. But everyone was excited when I started down the path to ministry, like I was going to fulfill my destiny. It made me feel like Don Quixote. There were windmills to tilt and damsels to save. I was on some predestined quest, and nothing could stop me.

But that's the thing about playing into the images people have of you. I wanted to make my mom and dad happy. And being a preacher would definitely make them happy. At the same time, my dad wished that I would take more of an interest in mechanics and mom wanted me to concentrate on my piano. But when it came down to brass tacks, I had "the mark." And while I could develop other skill sets there was no way the world could deter me the path that God and genetics had put me on.

Until it did. When the church decided that my liberal attitude of embracing the ministries and voices of women in the church was too much for their more

centric dispositions and they cast me aside, a great number of people were disappointed. My parents assured me that they still loved me, but it was obvious that I was a white knight that had fallen off his horse and, in some ways, many considered me a pariah, a has-been, or perhaps a never-will-be. That no matter what I did with my life, I would never measure up the expectations that came with having “the mark”

The sad part of it all was that I really hadn’t changed my views at all. It was the church that had changed. My mission wasn’t different. My birthmark did not disappear. I still had that itch that I couldn’t scratch, and I allowed myself to fall onto side paths, places that were a great deal seamier than the path I had been on.

This was necessary, because God needed to teach me lessons that I could never have learned in the environment I was in. I had to learn to love diversity. I had to become far less judgmental. I had to learn about the real Jesus that could only be found beyond the words of the Bible and biblical teachers. My image of Jesus had to change from a white skinned, white robed, bearded, elusive countenance to a dark skinned, road weary, patient, foot-washing servant. I had to experience life both on the high road and in the gutter. I had to learn what it meant to love my neighbor without judging my neighbor. I had to learn that different did not mean wrong. I had to learn to lean into Jesus for my very existence. I had to learn that the cost of my salvation extended far beyond the cross and the resurrection. I had to learn how very much God loved me, as my Creator taught me that the way to love my Lord was by loving God’s children. I

had to learn that my path was not the path of a birthmark, but the path of my savior.

The path that Jesus put me on was covered with harsh rocks, mud puddles, critters and crawly things, fire and ice, wind, rain and hail. It wasn't straight. It was definitely the long way around. There were roadblocks, warning signs, cliffs, mountains, rivers, naysayers and so many other deterrents. It was also the path finally led me to this place of service, transformed into a more realistic image of the tool I needed to be to meet the needs of a congregation. It is here, in this holy place of my Lord, that I am at peace with my journey. A peace where I know that God will take care of me and use me for the purpose that God intended for me to fulfill from the moment of my birth.

John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, had a very similar journey. John knew his path even before he was born. Listen to the words from Luke 1:39-45

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea,

40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"

43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

Now, if you are a child growing up in the household of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and they are always telling their friends and neighbors this story, how do you deal with that? What is it like to feel like your future is pre-ordained, destined, out of your control? What happens if you choose to do something else, instead? What happens if you tell your parents, “Ya know, mom and dad, I love you and I love the little stories you tell about me, but I think I will just put my own spin on things and run my own path, if that’s alright.” Which is what we normally see as teenagers come into their own.

John also had to deal with this whole pre-destined thing at a different level as well. With his father being a priest, he probably heard the words in Isaiah 40 verse 3 in temple.

Listen! It’s the voice of someone shouting, “Clear the way through the wilderness for the LORD! Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God!

And also our scripture today from Malachi:

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts.

What do you do when people start saying these scriptures may be talking about you? Add to this the fact that John is born the son of a priest, a Levite. Which means that he is a Levite as well and is supposed to embrace the calling to become a priest. There is a point in John’s young life that he has to face the challenge of either embracing the ministry everyone is thrusting upon him or fighting against it. And when he chooses to embrace the ministry, it isn’t a ministry at the temple. Instead it is a ministry to and for the people. This is what we read in Matthew 3:1-6

1 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea

2 and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord,

make straight paths for him.’”

4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.

6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

When we read this, we see that John has inserted himself right into the prophecy, that he understands the role intended for him. He didn't run from it even though it was a most difficult life. But the life that he is living is a shadow of the ministry of Christ as he brings his ministry to the people, rather than the people having to go to the temple.

At the same time, don't you know that he is asking himself, "Why am I doing this? What makes me special? Why does anyone want to listen to an old preacher wearing camel's hair and eating honey and locusts? What if I'm wrong and he doesn't show up?" And yet, here they come. The people come from all over Judea. In droves. To listen to this itinerant preacher promising that something better is about to come along. They ask for forgiveness of the sins and beg to be baptized. This is all preparation for something. At least, he hopes so.

And then it happens. The world changes direction. All of creation pivots as Jesus shows up to be baptized by John. What was only a promise, becomes a

reality. John's purpose became cemented as it entwined with the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Isn't it much easier to step into our destiny when the possibilities become realities? That day when someone acknowledges our calling? That day that we realize that we are no longer working for what will be, but our work has turned into what we are? Our demeanor changes as we are no longer aspiring to be something, but realize what we have become that something and can step into the role with confidence rather than trepidation.

Each of us has a calling, and there is nothing more fulfilling in life than acknowledging that calling and stepping into it. But in order to do that, we have to stop listening to voices around us and place our faith in the only voice that matters. We are each a creation, a tool, meant for the purpose of furthering the Kingdom of God.

It is only by fulfilling the purpose that God intends for us that we will ever find the fulfillment that we seek. That is the only way to scratch the itch of our calling. We don't all have a birthmark or a place in the scriptures that defines our calling, but we do have access to the same resources. Our prayer should rise out of humility when we call upon God to answer our plea of "God, what would you have me do to further your kingdom." That is our quest as Christians, to find the path and purpose that God has planned for us.

This Christmas season, let us seek that path in confidence and diligence. Like John, we have a purpose. God is willing to hone us to that purpose and put us to work. All we need do is ask and be willing to step into God's plan for us.

God bless you all!

Amen

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