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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington  
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Sermon on Malachi 3:1-7b

Worship Theme:

**WHEN THE LORD COMES NEAR, HE HUMBLER HIS PEOPLE**

People tend to feel a lot of pressure this time of year. We want our houses to look good for guests, and we want to impress people with the thoughtfulness of our gifts. What a welcome relief, therefore, to hear what is required to meet the Lord: only repentance. Jesus is not someone we need to impress with our good works. In fact, repentance is the opposite of work; it is the humble admission of our sin combined with the joyful trust that everything needed to bring us close to God has already been done by him.

Sermon Theme: **“The LORD Is Coming: Prepare the Way!”**

1. He Comes with Unchanging Justice
2. He Comes with Unchanging Mercy

What was wrong with the way? In Malachi 3, the LORD very deliberately says, *“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.”* This phrase **“prepare the way”** has the idea of clearing debris from a path and making sure that nothing stands in the way of what is about to come. The message was clear: **The LORD is coming!** *The compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin* (Ex. 34) – THAT LORD is coming!!

But the way wasn't ready yet. What was wrong? It might be easier to ask, what WASN'T wrong? Practically everything was messed up! The first two chapters of Malachi show us people of God who had made a terrible mess of their lives and their worship of the LORD. They doubted God's love for them, questioning how and if he was showing them love at all. They brought diseased and deformed sacrifices to his holy altar, as if the LORD would be pleased with such a sacrifice. And they even complained about doing so, as if it were this terrible burden to come before God and offer back to him a small fraction of the blessings he had so graciously given them. Their “worship” (if we can even call it that) had gotten so bad that we find these words in Malachi 1:10 – *“Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,” says the LORD Almighty, “and I will accept no offering from your hands.”*

And as if having complete carelessness about their festivals, sacrifices, and worship life wasn't enough, they also ruined their family lives. Marriage was dishonored and destroyed all over the place in a way that God had never intended. People did whatever they wanted, abusing marriages, breaking marriages, and then wondering why God seemed so far from them. They never considered that God's desire was for marriage to be a picture of the beautiful relationship he had between

himself and his people. Then to make matters even worse, after living in such a not-pleasing-to-God way, the people were brazen enough to ask, “*How have we wearied the LORD?*” The answer: *By saying, “All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them” or “Where is the God of justice?”*

Be careful though. We see this in our own lives, don’t we. Look closely, and be honest: If the LORD came today, would the way be properly prepared? Would we be ready? We let so many things in our lives come between us and the LORD, and the holiday season is certainly no exception to that. The distractions we face this time of year are endless! Everything under the sun pulls us away from the time we’re supposed to spend with the LORD – shopping and cleaning and decorating and baking and sending greetings and attending parties and all the other things the world tells us are so essential for Christmas. And don’t get me wrong – they are wonderful things, great blessings to celebrate and enjoy!

But not if they replace the LORD. Even when we do set aside time for him, are our thoughts focused on being present with him? Or are we physically present in church while our thoughts are anywhere BUT here? Do we open our Bibles at home and let our eyes scan the words while not a single one registers in our mind because the rest of the to-do list has already taken over? Diseased and deformed sacrifices – that’s what we haul to the altar of the LORD, saying “Light the fire and burn it up! It’s the best you’re going to get today.” Then on top of that we’re just as shameless in calling upon the God of justice to smite all the heathens who “don’t know the true meaning of Christmas.” Dear friends, we are an unprepared way indeed. Obstacles and debris everywhere, just like God’s people of old.

It’s not surprising at all therefore, when God says, “*I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the LORD you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,*” says the LORD Almighty. <sup>2</sup> *But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?”* **The LORD comes with unchanging justice**, but how shocking it is when he does, for he comes with judgment not only on “all those other people”, but on all these people too (yes, us!). He comes to refine and cleanse all the filth and impurity from within us. And it’s not just a small part of us! In fact, there is not a single part of us that is NOT ruined and tainted by our sinfulness. We’ve been that way since conception and we’ve spent every day of our lives sharpening our skills of rebellion and disobedience against the LORD and his Word. We wanted the Lord of Justice to come and take down his enemies! Well, we got our wish – he comes, and not one of us can endure it or stand in his presence. “*I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against all who do not fear me,*” says the LORD Almighty.

Suddenly the moment comes and the cry rings out: “**The LORD Is Coming! Prepare the Way!**” We begin to tremble and shake, fearing that the worst is about to happen, certain that our time has come and our doom is near at hand. But instead (shockingly!), we find that the coming of the LORD has the opposite effect! We’re not thrown out of the way like a piece of trash as the way is prepared for the LORD to come; rather, we ARE the way that is prepared for the LORD to come. He comes

not to burn us up and wash us away, but rather to burn up and wash away all impurities within us so that our hearts are properly prepared to welcome him when he comes.

In humility, we confess that this is something we never would have been able to do ourselves. No amount of effort or work on our part could have made us clean and pure enough to welcome the LORD. But **the LORD comes with unchanging mercy**. Psalm 103 reminds us that *He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. That's mercy!* We know who we are and we know what we've done and we have to confess that our hearts are just as unprepared as God's Old Testament people were, just as unprepared as anyone else in history has been. So the LORD prepares the way himself. He sends his messenger to remind people to be ready – **The LORD Is Coming!** He himself comes to purify and cleanse us, clearing away all distractions and debris – **The LORD Is Coming!** He comes not with a message of condemnation, but with a message of mercy: *"I the LORD do not change. So you are not destroyed. Return to me, and I will return to you."* As we humbly repent of our sins and confess them before the LORD, we learn yet again that he never left us in the first place; he was always right there with us, arms stretched out, ready and waiting for his people to see him and return to him in humble repentance, confident that what we need will always be found in him.

How could God possibly be so merciful to us? After all, isn't he a God of unchanging justice, who hates sin and condemns it?! Yes, he certainly is **The LORD who comes with unchanging justice**. Yet his justice is not carried out against you. Let that sink in for a moment! He carries out all his righteous justice and punishment upon the One Who Comes, the Long-Awaited Promised Messiah, the One Who Saves his people from their sins. When Jesus died on the cross, God's justice was appeased, all sin and guilt atoned for, the debt fully paid. That holy sacrifice left **a perfectly-prepared way for the LORD who comes with unchanging mercy**. His justice is already carried out! Now his mercy freely flows.

Countless things try to distract us and pull us away from our time with God, especially during such a busy time of year. So let this be the good news that fills our hearts and minds today and every day on our journey to Christmas: **The Way is prepared FOR AND BY the LORD who comes with unchanging justice and mercy**. He himself has done everything necessary to cleanse our hearts, which means nothing is wrong with the way anymore. We're ready! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.