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GETTING READY?

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:68-79

The Voyage of the Dawn Treader is one of the 7 books that make up *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis.

In this book we are introduced to a boy, Eustace Scrubb. Eustace is a selfish whiner, greedy, absorbed completely in modern, materialistic culture and values, disagreeable, bossing, and bullying, a cad and a snob. Once he is caught stealing. He takes more than his share of the rationed water. And one day he characteristically sneaks off to take a nap rather than doing his share of the work. He gets lost, takes refuge in a cave that was inhabited by a dragon and by sleeping on the dragon's hoard, turns into a dragon. He is a dragon for a period of time. He obviously is cut off from the others on the voyage with him. He slowly begins to appreciate them and then to realize that his behavior towards them had been beastly up until that time. As a dragon he is reunited with his shipmates and turns out to be quite helpful.

Finally one night, Aslan, a lion and the Christ figure of the Chronicles, comes to him. Aslan takes him to a pool in a garden on a mountain. Eustace realizes that getting into the pool will be beneficial to him, but he first needs to undress, to get rid of his dragon skin. Three times Eustace peels off his dragon skin, but it grows right back.

Then the lion said – but I don't know if it spoke – You will have to let me undress you. I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off.

Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off – just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt – and there it was lying on the grass;...

Then he caught hold of me – I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on – and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment.

In the Gospel lesson for this morning, we read of John the Baptist “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3: 3). In a sense this is what Eustace went through.

In the reading from the prophet Malachi we don't read of a lion's claw ripping into us and pulling the skin off, or of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But we read of the messenger of the Lord, “...he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver,....”

We are not talking about our modern day laundry detergent. No, a fuller was one who treated wool, using a strong and harsh cleaning agent, “caustic homemade stuff containing alkali, potash, and lye. It will get things clean, but it is very hard on fabrics,” as Stan Purdum writes in *Advent 2003: The Light of the Star*. Also, the purification is likened to the process for refining metals. This refiner’s fire is even more severe than the fuller’s soap. Involved is heating the metals at such high temperatures that the impurities can be eliminated. The soap and fire will be rough on the sinful places of people. No wonder Malachi wrote: ‘But who can endure the day of his coming,’ though some of you may think of the Air by the bass, ‘But who may abide the day of His coming?’ from George Frederic Handel’s “Messiah.”

Advent is that season of the church year in which we prepare ourselves for the coming of the Messiah, the Christ child, the Son of God. It is a time to prepare and clean up our hearts and our lives. It is a time to face our sin and welcome Jesus the Christ who came to forgive us.

Or as Tom Ehrich wrote it:

This is the challenge facing us. Can we imagine the life God has in mind for us? Can we muster the courage to accept liberation, to end our exiles, comfortable though they be, and to journey home?

For this season to make any sense, we must know ourselves as God knows us: as exiles needing courage to leave comfortable captivity and guidance to cross the wilderness to our true homes.

Advent is a time for repentance – not an easy thing to do, as we get ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Again, Stan Purdum writes:

Repentance is vital because hearing that we are sinners and that the path we are walking is crooked is the first step in addressing our sin and seeing the possibility of redemption. In that sense, being called sinners- while harsh and not easy to hear – is good news.

John’s message is possibly harshest on those of us who have tried to live upright and moral lives. ... When we try to do the right things, then it may be extremely difficult to acknowledge that we are sinners in need of repentance.

Another way to understand how harsh redemption can be is to recall that the New Testament word for repentance, *metanoia*, literally means ‘to turn the mind around.’ Repentance is not primarily about enumerating our sins but rather allowing ourselves to be plucked by God from the path we have been traveling and placed on God’s way instead. Turning around can be extremely difficult, especially when it means repudiating one direction and embracing another direction that we formerly mocked.

Malachi talked about repentance, not as being plucked by God from the path. Rather, the messenger is not so much calling on his hearers to purify themselves as he is pointing to the redemption God offers. God will provide redemption for all who are willing to be made clean; but it will be a drubbing experience, with the sin in one’s life scrubbed away by a harsh cleaner.”

This repentance, this cleansing, is not the kind of talk we want to deal with as we look forward to Christmas. And with all of the hectic busyness of these December days, who has the time to take

truly to repent? It doesn't fit in with the decorating, music, festive spirit, programs, holiday foods, celebrations, cooking, gift-giving, baking, doing for others, cleaning, and parties of the season – all of which take up our time, anyway.

Rather we want those moments, just often enough, that remind us that this is what Christmas is all about, about the reason for the season. Shouldn't these moments and doing the stuff of the Season be enough to get us ready for the coming of the Christ child? They are not enough if they do not guide our footsteps to the Bethlehem manger and do not help us to offer our love and devotion to Jesus the Christ.

In our passage from Luke we read the words of the father of the man we know as John the Baptist – the one who came to 'go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.'

At the naming ceremony for this one who later would proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, we hear words that his father Zechariah proclaimed about God.

We read of God who:

Looked favorably

Redeemed

Raised up

Spoke through...that we would be saved

Shown the mercy promised to our ancestors

Remembered his holy covenant

Swore to our ancestor Abraham

By the tender mercy

To give light to

To guide our feet

We read of God's promises to Israel and the saving acts of Jesus. We read that both John and Jesus are part of God's fulfillment of the promises to David and to Abraham, of God's word remaining living and powerful.

And we read that John's ministry will be to call people to repentance and point them to Jesus. Zechariah believed that John's role would be that of the one to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah of God.

Arden Mead wrote:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,' John cried, something like a bicycle bell. 'Clear the way!' the bell tells us, when we hear it ringing. Because Jesus is coming! Get everything out of the way that might make the Lord's journey difficult ... or even impossible.' ... Well, Jesus is coming. What can you do to help make the way ready for him?"

What are our own habits, times and ways of preparation to get ready for the Messiah? Is it preparation for a holiday that takes up our time, or is it the preparation for the coming of Jesus the Christ into our lives?

We are to get ready for the celebration of Christmas by the somber process of repentance? Yes! Truly to receive the gift of Jesus into our hearts and lives, we need to "clean house," to make the preparations within ourselves like the cleaning that we would do when we are expecting an honored

guest into our homes. We need to take stock of ourselves and make sure that we are on God's path for our lives.

Though the turning around that will be involved could be most unpleasant, we know that it is a merciful, saving, faithful God who wants us to come clean. God promises to light our journey home. The love of God is our guide as we redirect all of our lives toward God.

Again, as Tom Ehrich reminds us:

God's concern is 'sin,' which means 'missing the mark' or deviating from the good, and thereby becoming alienated from God. God seeks to bridge a distance, not punish an offender.

Have no doubts about God being with us, of bridging the distance between God and us, as we turn from our sin and turn toward God. Psalm 86:5 reads:

You are forgiving, kind and good, O Lord, rich and abounding in steadfast, faithful love to all who call upon you.

Demonstrating this for us, the table we will come to, the bread and wine that we will partake of, will nourish us as we turn around and are placed on God's way for the journey to our true homes, and will help us get ready to receive Jesus into our hearts and lives this Advent season.