

Unwelcome messages

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Perhaps December in your house is like it is in mine: more guests coming more often, which means more preparation. In my home, messages start showing up in odd places—unexpected and in many cases unwelcome messages. My daughter may wake up to see a “to do” list taped to her favorite cereal box, with the dire warning, “Make your bed before you eat!” My teenage son will find his messages taped to the refrigerator door.

My own messages are usually hanging on the front door just above the door knob, so there is absolutely no chance of avoiding them unless I sneak out the back door or crawl out through a window--which makes it obvious that I've seen the messages.

The messages are almost always about preparation: shopping for presents, picking out trees, cooking for dinner parties and gearing up for family gatherings. We are scurrying around to parties, meetings and malls and spending inordinate amounts of time consuming, working and planning. Tis the season of preparation upon layers of preparation.

The paradox is that the season of preparation is also the season of heightened distraction. While we are rummaging around in the closet for the silver tinsel, the prophet Malachi is warning of a refiner's fire where silver and gold will be purified and refined. While we are raising a tree to anticipate the gifts that will appear beneath its branches, Zechariah speaks of a mighty savior raised up with the gifts of mercy, forgiveness, peace and redemption. While the malls overflow with people trying to find the best gift for Christmas day, Paul prays that the people in Philippi will be overflowing with love so that they may be found pure and blameless on the day of Christ. While the world announces preparation for a holiday, John announces preparation for a way.

Each passage for this coming Sunday has a messenger jumping off the page; unexpected and even unwelcome messages are all over the place. Christians, of all

people, should not avoid such prophetic messages, though we're tempted to crawl out the window or the back door. The temptation to avoid spiritual preparation may force us to ask difficult questions: do we prefer comfortable holiday distraction to comfort-shattering calls to holiness and discipleship?

The name "Malachi" means "my messenger." This message is posted at the very end of the Old Testament, which in Protestant Bibles is followed by the Gospel of Matthew. In 2:17 the people ask: "Where is the God of justice?" An answer follows in this week's reading:

See I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

The church confesses that Christmas is the answer to the people's question in Malachi. Where is the God of justice? We need look no further than the poor Jewish child born in Bethlehem.

But perhaps contemporary people might bring different questions: where is the God of Christmas once the toys are broken, the wrapping paper is at the curb and the time off is over? Where are the people who profess to follow this God of justice during the rest of the year? Does the God we worship on December 25 still resemble the God of Malachi, Zechariah, Paul, Luke, John the Baptizer and the prophet Isaiah?