

GOD IS COMING

In difficult times or during occasions of weakness and uncertainty, it seems to be human nature to hope for a hero to come to the rescue.

Struggling sports teams diligently strive to acquire a superstar to carry their team to the playoffs and win. Each year, the number one pick is big news.... because maybe "this is the One."

When selecting political leaders, followers will project their personal desires and dreams on a candidate.... hoping that he or she will be the One who finally leads all to the promised land.

Sometimes,..... leaders rise to occasion, more often they don't, and some even abuse the trust bestowed upon them.

Many of us, at some point, will experience situations beyond our control / conditions that cause us to cry out to be rescued.

For centuries, the children of Abraham cultivated a longing / a hope for a Messiah, and this Messiah would truly be special.

He would be more than royalty.

He would be a theophany--God's physical presence here on earth.

The Luke text is Zechariah's prophecy, and it is saturated with glorious exaltation for the soon to be born Messiah.

He proclaims that the Messiah is mighty and will save his people from their enemies.

With few exceptions, the Jews at the time of this writing were Not in a happy place. They lived under a ruthless leader ... who was under the shadow of Rome. The Jews were under that shadow, too.

They needed help. They were dreaming to be delivered from their perils and hardships--to be able to come out from that shadow.

Most wanted a Mighty saviour to come to their aid.

Yet, sometimes... people don't realize their need to be saved.

They may have adjusted to life in the shadow,.. and change means.... well.... change--uncertainty.

Sometimes, people don't fully grasp their predicament, such as many teenagers in trouble. Or, it could be that a person simply doesn't want to admit the need for help.

I hate to admit it, but I think men tend to be more reticent about asking for help.

Let's have a show of hands. How many of you men..... first read the instructions? []

I won't ask anyone to confess to this, but I wonder how many have stayed up late Christmas eve trying to put a toy together,.... and still refused to read the instructions.....or ask for help?

And, by the way,... men never get lost, so there is no need to ask for directions. Instead, the path to our destination is merely temporarily out of view.

There are people, likely some women too, who don't want or see the need to be rescued.

Malachi's message is for those don't get it / who fail to grasp God in the Messiah concept / who do not understand the redemption / salvation the Messiah offers.

The preceding verse, verse 17 of chapter 2, states the reason why Malachi is warning his people. He states that they have wearied God because they say what is evil is actually good,... and then have the nerve to wonder where the God of justice is? Obviously, they've been living in the dark so long that they can't see clearly. They wanted God to serve them.

Malachi warns them that a messenger will precede the coming Messiah,..... and this messenger will be like a refiners fire that purifies silver and gold. In essence, to make them ready for the Messiah,.... they will be purged--made pure.

Malachi even asks, "But who can endure the day of his coming?"

I don't think the Hebrews appreciated his warning,.... and it even may have caused them to dread / to be afraid of the Messiah.

They may have wondered: if God does send this powerful leader / Messiah,.....who requires a purging messenger to make all ready.... then he may very well bring true justice, even judgment. ???

Anticipating getting caught and waiting for the consequences is a terrible feeling. Have you ever been in that situation? You know,... you've done something wrong,.....and your teacher or parents found out,... and they're coming to pay you a visit?

Waiting for pain is Not a pleasant sensation.

It is much like fearing a threat,....and hearing the foreboding footsteps coming closer.

Which reminds me of the first time I camped overnight in the woods without an adult.

I was 14, and with my friend Hal, we hauled at least a dozen boxes of supplies and tent....out to the woods on a church member's property.

The woods seemed like a mile from the road, but it was actually only a couple hundred yards.

My father helped the two of us haul our gear and set things up.

We brought pots and pans, and enough food to last a week, ... just in case we got real hungry. We meticulously planned and packed everything we'd need, including an axe.

Before my father left, he helped us build a fire.

I thought he was being helpful, but it may have been an act of public safety.

After we ate, we sat by the fire for a while, and it was when we decided to get in the tent that we realized we forgot to bring a flashlight. There was enough glow from the flames to see well enough in the tent,... at first. But as the fire went down, it began to get dark, real dark.

The woods can be pretty spooky in the dark, and without a flashlight to illuminate the truth, each night sound became increasingly threatening.

Granted, these days, 14 year olds aren't frightened by such things,... but we were. And soon, our imagination was making us even more afraid.

Two boys, sitting in a dark tent,...waiting to be attacked.

Each noise we heard, Hal would say, "What if its...." visioning something dreadful. Finally, I injected, "Nobody in their right mind would out here tonight." To which he responded, "Exactly."

All the while, I'm praying for a flashlight, and rechecking the stuff in the tent.

Then, Hal said, "What's that?"

We got real still, and we both heard branches being crunched down the path, and it sounded like footsteps.

Hal whispered, "Where's the axe?"

I answered, "It by the tree, beyond the fire."

He said, "Go get it"

"You're crazy. You go get it", I replied.

It was too late anyways, the crunching sound was definitely footsteps, and ... they were coming our way. I peeked out the door, and I could see the oscillating sway of a flashlight,.... coming closer, and that's all I could see.

"He's got a flashlight. He's got to know we're here", I nervously said.

We were trapped. We couldn't see to run. We were trapped.

All of sudden a voice called out, "Gordon, you left the flashlight on the counter. I thought you might need it."

It wasn't an escaped serial killer; it was my father..... what a relief.

In addition, he said, "I hope you don't mind that I brought my sleeping bag. I really didn't want to drive all the way back."

We all slept well.

I had hoped and prayed for a flashlight, but instead I got what I really needed: the presence of a loving and caring adult.

And by the way,.... for all of you who hear footsteps in night coming for you. It's a good sign if the one coming is carry a light.

Bad news hides in the dark. Saviours bring illumination.

It is fascinating how our imagination can get the best of us, and how we can get to the point where we are afraid of God.... afraid to be exposed--illuminated.

Moreover, it is interesting how we pray and hope for things we want, yet fail to see what it is that we really need.

When God comes in the flesh or in the Spirit, God presents to us exactly what we need.

This true salvation, God providing what is needed, is what the stories in the Bible are about. Adam and Eve.....got themselves in a jam. They tried to take over the knowledge of good and evil,.... and it was way too much for them. It would mean their destruction. Then,,.....they heard God coming. They tried to hide.

They wanted to be the impossible, but what they needed was a way out and a way to carry on, to live. When God arrived, that is what God provided for them.

Much later, humanity was spirally downward, and desperately needed a new beginning. The story of Noah and the arc is about rescue. It is about how God saved humanity, and sailed creation to a fresh start.

Sometimes we get what we think we need, only to find out we were terribly wrong. The Hebrews wanted a king, and they got kings, but nationalism didn't work out so well for them.

So, God sent them prophets and a messenger to help them to see,..... and to help them prepare.....for the Messiah / for God in the flesh.

To all those under the shadow of the Roman Empire praying for deliverance.... andto all the Ebenezer Scrooges..... the Messiah arrived,.....not as a mighty warrior to destroy the enemies all around,..... but instead the Messiah--God's salvation came as a baby to end the enemies within.

A baby! A baby is so vulnerable. What was God thinking?

As we all know, a baby entering the world means change. The lives of the recipients / the new parents are radically changed. Babies may be vulnerable, but they can also be very powerful,... when they are received with love. They'll turn your world upside down. And, babies mean change..... lots of changes, not to mention they need changing, too.

Properly receiving a baby / truly embracing a baby requires LOVE,.. real, unselfish, honest of love.

For those who are ready, they can receive God's salvation as John presents it--as the light and as logos, the word.

Others, who don't quite understand, they need Luke's birth narrative in order to grasp what it means to receive God's gift of redemption.

Holding a baby can open the heart to love, and to comprehend what Zechariah said, "The dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow...."

And then there are those who are afraid to love, such as Charles Dickens' Scrooge. He had to experience three messengers who were like a refiner's fire. He was purified. He learned to love and to be loved. The fire brought out the best him, like bringing out gold and silver to its pure, beautiful condition. The messengers fire doesn't destroy; it actually brings healing so that love can be experienced.

This IS the Christmas Story: God is coming, and that means Love is coming.

The banner today is "love."

In love, as love, God comes to you and me, and offers to give us what we need. It may not be what we want or think we need, but it is what we need--our true hearts' desire.

Are we ready to love..... and to be loved? Are we ready?

It is Advent.

Welcome to the dawning light,.....to a baby..... or to the refiner's fire.

God is coming,..... and so is illumination.