My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

In the days of old, we’re talking about Roman Empire and before (we might even say Biblical times, right?) the king traveled a little differently than in today’s jet age. Roads to a distant country had to be scouted out, not only for dangers along the way for security of the king, but also improved to make sure the journey would be safe. No rockslides from above. No narrow roads in danger of collapse into the valleys below. Sturdy enough to make sure that everything needed could get there in safety. It was not an undertaking that was taken lightly, and it often took several weeks to prepare the way.

So it’s a bit of a surprise to us when John the Baptist tells us that we need to prepare the way for the Lord, the King of Kings, right? This is a God and King who isn’t seen, who doesn’t make journeys on roads and bridges. Paths and roads made straight and smooth? Whatever for?

The word “Malachi” means “my messenger”. And in the time of that writing, the Jews had been conquered by the Babylonians, shipped off to exile, liberated by the Persians, sent back to Jerusalem to rebuild, but they were still vassals of a foreign empire. It had been over 100 years since they were a free people, and there were many who had wearied of the Lord’s prophets. They said that God must delight in those who do wrong, there is so much suffering. They pray and cannot figure out where God’s will is in the world, and they ask where the God of justice can be found. Does this sound familiar at all?

The people both of ancient times, Jesus’ time, and our own time seem to have this acute problem with God: that there is, or maybe should be, immediate retribution or reward based on obedience to God’s commands. And it brings into focus that there’s a question of God’s justice in all of the world’s circumstances.

Do we ever feel like that? Where is God in today’s troubles? Why doesn’t the planet just cool off for a while and we can live our lives in carbon-soaked bliss? Why do we focus on race in just about everything these days? Why do the rich get ever richer, so much so that if we added up all the wealth of America’s billionaires they have more than the GDP of Japan and yet pay almost nothing in taxes?

NOW does this sound familiar?

We’ve talked about this, how God patiently listens to our laments. The Kingdom is always coming, and God will save. But we can’t just skip to the end; if we want to have justice, we have to change. But repentance, in the Bible, means “turn around”. And turning around our life either individually or as a society can be jarring. It’s often not a joyous expectation or experience if we are told what we need to do, just like the climate change bit. In order to achieve the end game of saving our planet as we know it, we have to do all kinds of stuff we don’t like.

In ancient times, it was called a time of purification, this responding to a call for God’s justice. But too often we think that relief for the many means judgement on the few and powerful. We too often want a justice that punishes, not restores. We want to know those who caused us to suffer will suffer too. But is that God’s way?

In modern life, we’re told that if we want something, then we have to go out and get it. If someone’s wronged us, then we have to go and tell somebody about it. If we want success, we have pull ourselves up by our boot straps. We are masters and mistresses of our destiny, right? Isn’t that how we were conditioned by the folks around us from the time we were knee-high to a grasshopper? If we need purification, then, let’s figure out what’s needed and go get it, because we want to skip to the end game—God’s promises kept as we envision them and enemies overthrown as we define them.

We want success without the struggle. We want justice without knowing what that is, and the experience of our journey in getting there. We want it our way, the painless way, without sacrifice because we have already held God accountable for having made us suffer enough.

But here’s where God breaks into our lives in a very weird and unexpected way. In the ministry of John the Baptist, we don’t need the initiative. God comes to us.

And it’s in that turnabout that we have come to a new understanding of God and God’s good news. God will come help us to know that we are loved no matter what fortunes befall us in history. And that we can count on that Day of the Lord, but no longer looking for gotchas at the expense of others. Hope is eternal, for all humans, and all nations.

Luke understands that not only the Lord’s coming, but that preparation for that coming are the initiatives of a gracious God, one which turns the Day of the Lord from one of destruction and terror to one of anticipation and liberation. Luke gives us a bunch of names and titles to remind us that the preparation for the advent of Jesus is in the context of world history, not just Jewish or Christian history, and in that sense, the universal purpose of the Gospel as it belongs to all people.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Hope for all our worries is a huge project, like trying to land a jumbo jet in the backyard. Sometimes finding hope can seem like that.

But we don’t these days do very much in terms of opening up ourselves to let God come in. We try and do too much, and in doing so, we try and control the Gospel as the Church’s thing that is carried to others. But it was there before John, Jesus, or the church existed. This is God’s hope and gift.

I’d like to leave you with a couple of quotes from a movie I like called “Hope Floats”. ‘There will come a time when everything you believed is finished. That will be the beginning…Beginnings are [quite] scary. Endings are [sometimes] sad. But it’s the middle that counts the most. So when you find yourself at the beginning, you just have to give hope a chance to float up. And it will’.

Prepare ye, the way of the Lord, indeed.

Thanks be to God, Amen.