

We are in full swing of this Advent season, the season of preparation. We are decorating our houses, putting up trees and lights, making gift lists and purchasing gifts. We're baking, hosting and attending parties, preparing our homes for guests and making travel arrangements. We're in full mode of the season's "busy-ness."

Then, enter John the Baptist. He interrupts our activities and demands a preparation of a different kind: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight!" (v.4). Sorry, John. We're a little busy trying to get the bows on the packages straight, and that Christmas tree topper leans to the right a little more each day. We're busy getting our house in order, especially for the coming guests.

Our preparations for them can be quite radical. A writer reflects on her mother's preparations for company. She recalled that her mother would get down on her hands and knees and comb the fringe of the area rugs, so there were no knots and the entire fringe lined up perfectly. The writer admitted that it was beautiful when her mother finished, but she teased her mother that any shuffle of the guests' feet would cause it to be in disarray again. Her mother wanted everything, down to the fringe on the carpet, to be perfect when they were preparing for guests.<sup>1</sup>

Often, when we prepare for guests, we don't stop at straightening up. We examine the house closely and notice that the kitchen counter is too messy. It's time to fix the broken doorknob, the loose towel rack, the burned-out lightbulb, the leaky guest toilet. All of those things were ok for

us, but for guests, we want to make special preparations. We go all out.

The distant voice in the wilderness calls to us: In the same way we examine our homes and prepare for guests, it is time to examine our lives, our hearts, and our priorities. In this passage, John forces us to examine ourselves and our world during this season of Advent. John reminds us that "It is time to prepare to welcome Jesus and not just our invited Christmas houseguests."<sup>2</sup>

Once we do the self-examination and see some things that need tidying up or fixing, how do we do this? How do we make the paths straight for the coming Lord? Malachi helps us here: we look to the Refiner. The Refining God who purifies us and removes all the impurities. Christ forgives our sin and removes all the things that get in the way on the path. We have to remove what blocks us from the coming Christ. And, we replace it with love.

Doug Ruffle<sup>3</sup>, a missionary who served in Argentina, shares of a time when his church's Christmas pageant went off script, yet captured a new story of love. The Christmas pageant began like most Christmas pageants with the youth and children dressed as shepherds, wise men, an innkeeper, and, of course, Mary and Joseph. They had a real donkey to transport Mary past the front of the church to the church's front door, which served as the inn.

The innkeeper was played by a 12-year-old boy named Facundo. Facundo was the church caretaker's son who lived in the back of the property. Facundo only had two lines in the pageant, and he knew them by heart. The first was "There is no room in the inn," and the second was "We have a

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word*, kindle edition, location 1714.

<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word*, loc. 1707.

<sup>3</sup> *A Missionary Mindset: What Church Leaders Need to Know to Reach Their Community — Lessons from E. Stanley Jones*, by Douglas Ruffle. Copyright © 2016

Discipleship Resources, Nashville, Tennessee. <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/room-at-the-inn/?id=li20181205>

stable you can use.” He had practiced and prepared; he was ready.

Joseph led the donkey that carried Mary to the front of the “inn” and knocked on the door. Facundo opened the door and stood in the doorway. When he saw the donkey, and Mary sitting on it, his eyes grew wide.

Joseph asked for a room, which was the cue for Facundo’s first line. Facundo kept looking at Mary on the donkey and said nothing. He remembered his line, he knew what he was supposed to say, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it. Nervous laughter came from the audience.

Joseph insisted, “We have come from a long journey, and my wife is due to have a baby.” Facundo looked back and forth at the donkey and Mary. A prompter behind the church door whispered his line, and Facundo finally said it aloud with hesitation: “There is no room in the inn.” More giggles came from the audience.

Joseph tried to cue Facundo’s second line by saying, “We are so tired; do you know anywhere we can stay?” Facundo looked at the donkey, then Mary, then Joseph. The prompter whispered his second line. Facundo stood still, looking at the couple for what seemed like an eternity, and then blurted out, “You can have my room!” pointing to the back of the church property.

There was silence. It wasn’t supposed to play out that way. Joseph just stood there looking at Facundo. If Facundo had said his lines correctly, Mary and Joseph would have gone to the end of the sidewalk in front of the church, where there was a stable prepared for them.

Finally, Mary broke the ice. “Okay. That’s really nice of you.” She got down off the donkey, and Mary and Joseph went

through the door of the inn to Facundo’s room. The audience burst into applause.

John the Baptist would be happy with Facundo. He prepared a way for Christ even if it didn’t go down as scripted. Facundo’s preparation for Christ changed the story. It was different from what people were expecting. Facundo was bold and opened his heart for Christ’s welcoming love and then shared that love.

Don’t be afraid to go off-script this season. Include preparing for Christ in your season’s preparations. Examine your life. Tidy up and fix what is broken. Go to the Refiner. Allow him to purify you, so you can receive his love, and then share it with others. Change the story if you have to. We prepare the way by welcoming the coming Christ with love.

I will close with Mary Oliver’s poem, *Making the House Ready for the Lord*.<sup>4</sup> Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but still nothing is as shining as it should be for you. Under the sink, for example, is an uproar of mice it is the season of their many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves and through the walls the squirrels have gnawed their ragged entrances but it is the season when they need shelter, so what shall I do? And the raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard while the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow; what shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling in the yard and the fox who is staring boldly up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox, the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know that really I am speaking to you whenever I say, as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2006/09/25/making-house-ready-lord>