Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair,
we had everything before us, we had nothing before us,
we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way . . .

Charles Dickens wrote those words over 150 years ago, yet how apt they seem for today. How wise we are, yet how foolish we often act. People believe, but they’ll believe just about anything. We are enlightened, many say, but perhaps that’s just because our eyes have adjusted to the darkness. The spring of hope always seems to be shorter than the winter of despair. We can do anything, we think; yet how many do nothing at all? And most everyone thinks they’re going to heaven, or that the next life will be a better life, but are they? Do they know they way? Perhaps the fact that Dickens wrote those words so long ago is a lesson to us, that the more things change . . . right? The more they stay the same.

But it’s the first words of that quote that I think seem to describe this time of year for many. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

It is the best of times as the mood of many turns joyous. But it is the worst of times for it also brings out package thieves, pickpockets, crushing debt, and those eager to take advantage of the good will of others.

It is the best of times in that we get to see family. But it is the worst of times when there’s a newly empty seat at the family table, a loved one no longer there. Or when old arguments or grudges, buried by time and distance, make their way to the surface again.

It is the best of times when we see the lights and decorations, and hear the special music and carols. It is the worst of times when those lights expose and that music echoes around in the emptiness of broken and lonely hearts.
It is the best of times with lots of special events and things to do. It is the worst of times when it seems as if everyone is celebrating but you. Or when lots of special events and things to do only add more busyness to our already overbusy lives.

It is the best of times when Christmas is coming! It is the worst of times when that very Christ seems so far away.

And maybe the worst of it all is ping-ponging back and forth between the two; between the best of times and the worst of times. Maybe you know what I’m talking about. I think you do. It can be exhausting.

So maybe we’ve got it all wrong. Maybe this isn’t what Christmas is all about. Maybe all this isn’t the best way to prepare for it. Maybe there’s a better way . . .

We heard from the prophet Malachi today that God said: **Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me.** God had, in fact, sent many messengers, many prophets. But this one would be the greatest of all. John the Baptist. The last prophet. The last one before God would, in fact, come. The one who wouldn’t just proclaim God’s coming sometime in the distant future, but who would be the one to roll out the red carpet for Him. For His coming was imminent. Here. Now. And that the way to prepare for His coming was to repent. Repent not just that maybe we’ve got this holiday stuff all wrong, but that maybe we’ve got our lives all wrong. All mixed up. That’s more like it.

Now, you’ve heard that word repent a lot in the church. So maybe we’ve grown dull to it. That happens with words. That’s why the world keeps coming up with new ones. For examples, what once was hep became cool and then became rad and then bad and phat and then the bomb and now I don’t even know what the latest word is! I’m too old to keep up with it all. The word repent is a good word - we shouldn’t stop using it. But maybe today we can use the image Malachi used to help us think about it in a new way. **The image of silver that needs purifying.**

Now, some of you may have things made of silver - jewerly or silverware (that yes, really used to be made of silver!) or something else. What happens to it? It tarnishes. And not because you’ve used it or misused it. You can have it in a jewerly box or packed away on a shelf, and when you take it out . . . it’s all black and tarnished. The air simply does that to it. Toxic air, I guess we could say.

And us, too, living in and breathing in the toxic, sinful air of our world. It tarnishes us. It works in our minds and hearts to change us - make us think wrong, want wrong, act wrong. Toxic air all around us. Like the politics of personal destruction that has become the norm when dealing with those who disagree with you. Or sin that once was shameful now become mainstream, normal, even good. Our own hearts, too, grown hard and
calloused to sin that once pricked our consciences but now no more. We’re tarnished. And far worse than silver, which gets tarnished only on the surface. We don’t become tarnished - we’re born that way. And we are tarnished through and through, inside and out, body and soul. And tarnished hearts and minds and lives act that way. And so tarnished hearts and minds and lives need purifying, cleansing.

Repentance, then, is saying that we’re tarnished. I’ve desired what I should not desire. I’ve thought what I should not have thought. I’ve spoken when I should not have spoken. I’ve done what I should not have done. And because of all that, I have also failed to desire, think, speak, and do the good I should have. And so John’s words, well, they should terrify us, when he says: *Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* For do I produce the good fruit, the good works, God requires? Or good enough works? Or enough of them? *Who can stand when he appears?* Malachi asked. You? Not me.

Now, you don’t have to listen to or pay attention to John, or Malachi, or any of the other prophets, to prepare for His coming. Many don’t. But that would be a shame. For what John was proclaiming was *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* Or in other words, for purifying and cleansing our tarnished hearts, minds, souls, and lives. Because that’s what God wants most of all - to forgive you.

You see, that’s why John (and later Jesus) would get so upset - and John even called them *a brood of vipers!* - when folks would say: *We have Abraham as our father!* As if that was the reason they were prepared; why they would not be consumed. Because they were descended from the right guy. That’s not it at all. That’s *tarnished thinking.*

Listen, rather, to what Malachi said: *I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.* *Children of Jacob* was another way of claiming Abraham as your father, for Abraham was the father of Isaac who was the father of Jacob. But what was the reason why they were not consumed in the time of Malachi (because they really should have been)? It is because *I the Lord do not change.* Or in other words, because I the Lord made a promise, and when I make a promise, I do not change it or change my mind. And the promise was this: not that everyone descending from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would be saved, but that *from* them, one of their descendants, would be the one to save them. A Saviour who would be consumed for our sin. A Saviour who would take that consuming for us. And He did. That by His blood shed for us, in our place, on the cross, we who are tarnished be cleansed, purified, and prepared.

So it is not those who have Abraham as their father or who are children of Jacob by physical descent who will not be consumed; it is rather those with faith in the one God promised would come *from* them. And by faith in that one, given the name Jesus, we are cleansed, purified, and prepared, and will be able to stand, untarnished, forgiven, when He comes again.
So I guess (to use the words I began this sermon with) that makes the worst of lives into the best of lives! Not because we do it. We can’t! Silver can’t untarnish itself, and neither can we. But because He does it. Our Saviour does it. Applying to us His cleansing, untarnishing blood as He washes us with it in baptism, rubs us clean with it in His absolution, and purifies us with it as He gives us His Body to eat and His Blood to drink. So while repenting is not easy, admitting that we’re tarnished and not just a little! . . . it is good.

And made good again, cleansed, untarnished, prepared by Jesus, you get to live that way. No longer ping-ponging back and forth between the best of times and the worst of times, but living the new life that Jesus has cleansed you for and given to you. His life. The life John described for those who asked him how they should then live, and the life Paul described, one being filled with the fruit of righteousness. A life filled with those things that are not tarnished, but cleansed and pure. The good we are cleansed and set free to do by Jesus. Not because you have to, but because once you’re silver that’s been untarnished . . . why would you want to go back?

So John came, the last and greatest prophet. To prepare the way of the Lord. The way for Him to come to you and cleanse you, forgive you, untarnish you. To prepare you. You don’t have to listen to John. Many don’t. But maybe we should. And maybe that will bring us the joy we need, the joy we crave. The joy not of getting what we want for Christmas, but of getting Jesus for Christmas. And everyday. So that we can live our lives not in fear of the end or of our end in death, but knowing that (as Paul said): I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. That’s confidence! Not in ourselves, but in the one who will never let us down. Who promised, and came. Who died, and forgives. And who wants you as His own. Because He knows that underneath all that tarnish is something precious. More precious to Him than anything else. You.

So repent. Yeah, it’s an old word, but a good one. And so to hear the forgiveness He has for you. And as you hear, remember the day you were baptized, when God washed you and marked you and gave you all His promises. And come and receive His Body and Blood, consumed for you on the cross and now consumed by you in His Supper. That Jesus live in you and you in Him. Until He comes again. And it will no longer be the best of times and the worst of times, but only the best. And it really will be. And you will be ready to stand before Him. Untarnished. And that’s really what makes Christmas merry after all.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.