

Words to the Faithful
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Scriptures:

Malachi 3:1-7

¹See, 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. ²But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

⁵Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

⁶For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. ⁷Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, "How shall we return?" (NRSV)

Sermon:

The Book of Malachi, which means "My Messenger", is the last book in our Old Testament, and one of the last voices of ancient Israel's prophet-sages. The book is aimed at persuading its readers to follow the Torah of Moses and strengthening people's resolve in this direction by asserting the superiority of Torah over prophecy.¹

The book deals primarily with the offenses of the ancient Israelite priests and their sacrificial duties in the Temple, the ethical breaches in marriage on the part of Jewish men, and the failure of the people to pay the Temple tithe or tax. However, the spirit of Malachi's message is nonetheless relevant for us today.

The author of the Book of Malachi is lost in history, although some scholars believe the author may have been a person named Malachi, writing after the people of Israel had returned from the Babylonian Exile, rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem, and had achieved a degree of normalcy on their holy land. However, according to Malachi, the leadership and the people had fallen back into some pre-exile patterns of behavior, while others had developed a serious attitude problem. Malachi indicates that the priests' and people's behaviors and attitudes are the reasons things aren't going so well for them.

To get a sense of Malachi, let us imagine a scene where we are arbitrators in a dispute between God and God's people who have returned from the exile. God brings the charges that

¹ The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition (p. 1255). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

the people are disloyal to God and God's ways. Or, we can hear our text as God, a parent confronting a child, for breaches of family honor and disobedience.

The first set of charges are directed at the Temple priests, the representatives and mediators between God and the people. The charges are that the priests are allowing blemished, sick, damaged, or stolen animals to be offered to God instead of pure, unblemished creatures per the Mosaic Laws. We also learn that the priest may be showing favoritism in these cultic compromises for bribes as well as allowing certain aspects of the worship of the goddess, known as the Queen of Heaven, to be a part of the worship of God. In short, the people do not honor God, offering to God less than their best; thus, God is not blessing the people and is in fact afflicting them commensurate to their dishonor and disobedience. Malachi adds that the priests are not only lazy but corrupt by having forsaken teaching the knowledge of God's true ways, Torah, to the detriment of the people.

The next charge is that the Israelite men are acting dishonorably and sinfully by divorcing their Israelite wives—women of the covenant—to marry non-Jewish women or as scripture calls them foreign women. In addition, the men are not marrying Israelite women but pagan women. These "foreign" women brought to the Jewish household and community vile practices of sorcery, astrology, idolatry, and aberrant sexual practices as a part of the worship of their gods. As such, these women are portrayed as being wedded to other gods, and thus, their marriages make Jewish men adulterers.

Finally, the people are not paying their Temple tax or tithe. This tithe was needed to maintain the Temple and all its services, so not paying the Temple tax defrauds God even further. An underfunded Temple means compromises to the honor status of Israel's God among God's people and others as well as an underfunded priesthood makes it ripe for bribery. We further glean from Malachi that there are those who are not only in unholy marriages, as it were, but there are those that swear false oaths, cheat laborers of their hire, and subvert the cause of the widow, orphan, and the stranger in the land.

In this light, some of the more righteous people were feeling hopeless and discouraged due to God's long suffering or indifference to the moral corruption and religious compromises of the day. The discouraged and disillusioned began to whine, saying,

'All who do evil are good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.' Or by asking, 'Where is the God of justice?' "(2:17)

God's response is:

¹³You have spoken harsh words against me, says the LORD. Yet you say, 'How have we spoken against you?' ¹⁴You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners [with downcast and glum faces] before the LORD of hosts?' ¹⁵Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape.' (3:13-15)

To such a situation, the opening words in our scriptures today speak of God sending Israel's guardian angel to confront those who do not respect and honor God in their religious practices and daily living. This messenger, terrible in presence, like a refining fire and the purifying lye used in the smelting processes of precious metals, will cleanse the priesthood, and they will once again present offerings in righteousness. This messenger will also relentlessly accuse the adulterer with his foreign wife and those who cheat the laborer, abuse the widow, orphan, and the stranger.

Many ancient sages and rabbis blended the supernatural messenger that Malachi speaks of with the super ordinary prophet Elijah, whom you may remember was taken up to the abode of God without having to experience death and is scheduled to return in the future to usher in the Great Day of the Lord. A day that will see the purifying of the priesthood and the people of God.

In the Christian scriptures, many believed John the Baptist was Elijah returned or one like Elijah that had come to declare the coming Day of the Lord and calling for repentance before the coming of the ruler-messiah of Jewish expectation. Even Jesus at times was confused with being the prophet Elijah or the revived spirit of John the Baptist. John came not only as a relentless accuser of God's people and their leaders, but also at the back of his message were words of hope and salvation, as was Malachi's.

Obviously, we modern folks don't understand our relationship to God as the ancient Jews did with their Temple cult, animal sacrifices, and tit-for-tat relationship with God measured in blessings or afflictions. However, I don't think it takes much of a leap of the imagination to see that serving certain interests of modernity, social and cultural accommodations, and economic prosperity have undermined humanity's relationship to God at the personal, institutional, and collective levels as well as how people relate to others, nature, and creature. In other words, God does not directly punish people for breaking God's laws; however, breaking God's laws bring their own inherent consequences.

I find it amazing that for many in our country today, sin, that which offends God, harms the self, and others, is no longer a matter of poor character or willful choices but rather the results of some murky, psychological or sociological phenomenon. In times like these, even the most spiritual among us may tend to become a bit cynical, cop an attitude, and doubt that God is present and really interested in justice or righteousness. Even the most devout among us may want to retreat into the caves of our personal salvation and cease to engage the world with the good news of the Gospel of Christ.

Like Malachi, I am disheartened at how people today spend their time and money on self-indulgent, extravagant distractions all the while the institutions in our country and the world that are commissioned by God and charged by humankind to teach eternal, moral, and spiritual values as well as to champion and care for the oppressed, the diseased, the morally and spiritually troubled must beg for pocket change. Or, worse yet, they are forced to compete in the arenas of mass entertainment, pop-religious psycho-babble, or shallow feel-good religion where emotionalism masquerades as truth. How can we expect a better world when we are not willing to give of our best in time, talent, or financial resources to such an end?

Furthermore, those of us in the church who try to be faithful and live by higher, moral and spiritual standards, often find ourselves asking the same questions as some in Malachi's day. Where is God's justice? Where is God's concern for the righteous and the faithful beyond a lot of religious rhetoric and theological abstractions? Where is God's concern for the victims of the corrupt, the immoral, and their lifestyles? God, when are you going to come pass judgment on this mess, and fix it? NO! Don't give me any of that woo-woo apocalyptic, end of the world coming soon stuff. We've heard that for thousands upon thousands of years, and here we are.

Yes, Lord, I know that John the Baptist, a fiery and straight speaking prophet like Elijah, came with words of condemnation, coming judgment, and hope; Jesus the Christ came with words of condemnation, coming judgment, and hope; but it doesn't seem to be getting a whole lot better.

Let me point out something so obvious as to be embarrassing to say it. As I said earlier, we don't understand our relationship to God as the ancients did in a sort of a tit-for-tat

exchange; however, since day-one in God's processes of revealing the divine self and the divine will, humankind has been portrayed as a willful and self-determining partner in those processes alongside God.

Contrary to the ancient Greek church fathers and their hijacking the nature of God with Greek metaphysics, there is an aspect to God as the All-powerful Immutable Creator/Sustainer that does in fact change and becomes more of what God is in relationship to creature and creation. I say this because God relates to creation and creature, God loves, and is therefore changed by and increased by the interaction with the beloved and our choices. (The Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, are classic examples of this dynamic of change.) Furthermore, God seeks to influence human behaviors toward the good and the right, but God cannot remain God and control our choices or behaviors independent of our wills. God has sought to influence through the whispered word of the spirit, scripture, and divine witnesses across the ages, but God will not or can take away our right of self-determination and maintain God's own integrity as a just and loving god. Scripture tells us that our choices contrary to God's will with their consequences grieve God deeply.

My authority for such insights is scripture itself, not the Greek church fathers interpreting or co-opting the philosophical models of Plato, Aristotle, or Plotinus to give authority and legitimacy to the Gospel of Jesus Christ for their day. Therefore, if this world is full of sin, injustice, greed, oppression, poverty, and disease, it is not God's fault or something God abides lightly. It may be to a large degree related to God's human partner's disobedience and disinterest in their human brothers and sisters or other creatures and creation.

Injustice, greed, oppression, and disease are the ever-present relentless accusers of humankind's unwillingness or indifference to honor its divine partnership with God in a mutual, world-building enterprise. I say this because we are after all Stewards of God's creation and creatures, are we not; crowned a little lower than the angels? Or, did scripture get that wrong?

I believe that John the Baptist was God's Anointed Messenger and Jesus of Nazareth the fullest, possible manifestation of God's will, power, and presence in human flesh. In John's message and in Jesus' message and witness, we see and hear God's purposes for creation, creature, and humankind. Therefore, Christians, God's Messenger-Witnesses, Jesus the Christ has come—stop waiting, and for God's sake let's stop whining and complaining—let's do something!

"How shall we return?" Jesus has come; he has taught us what is right, what is good and acceptable before God. Jesus, as God's messenger, has taught us as individuals and as a people how to come to God and be blessed as well as how to endure until God's ways rule supreme on planet earth—God's kingdom come.

As God's faithful, we must remain steadfast in the ways of God as made known in Jesus Christ. We must leave our unrealistic expectations behind and embrace God's moral and ethical ways of life in the ordinariness of our days until God does what God is going to ultimately do. When we live this way, as Malachi tells us, then God's fullest blessings will come upon us, our people, and our land.

Malachi said God doesn't change. God as Creator/Sustainer is immutable; God the lover of God's people has always been there for us, and God's moral and ethical ways of life have always brought blessing, hope, and peace to those who participate with God in the life of this world. And, those who do thus add to God's joy as it does to theirs. God has sent numerous prophets and witnesses to these facts, facts that still stand true today.

So faithful of God, take heart and hear again Malachi:

¹⁶ Then those who revered the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the LORD and thought on his name. ¹⁷They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them. ¹⁸Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him. (Malachi 3:16-18) Amen.

On this second Sunday of Advent, let us be at peace in our hearts and minds. God is Sovereign, we are God's people, and because we have discerned God's will and ways and try to live our lives in Christ, I believe our names are recorded in a book of remembrance; that is, in the living mind and memory of God.

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