

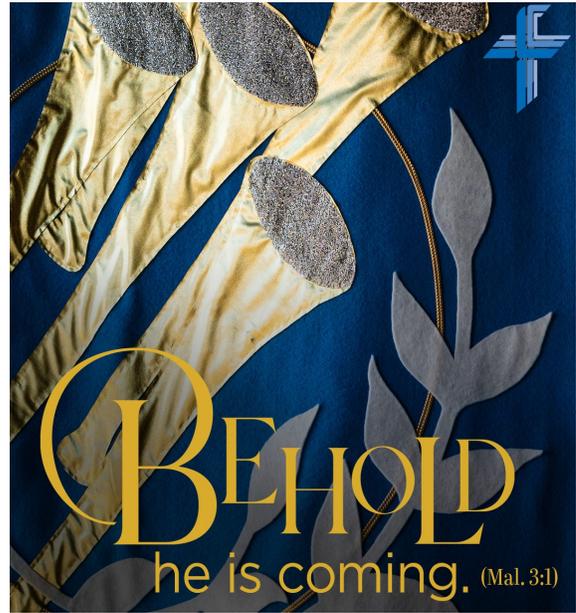
The Second Sunday in Advent

Malachi 2:17-3:7b

December 5, 2021

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”

Mal 3:1.



A Tale of Two Messengers

Dear brothers and sisters: grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week we heard from the prophet Jeremiah who brought a promise to a people in exile: the promise that they were not forsaken by God, the promise that He would remember them and restore them. Here is what He told them through the prophet: “at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”¹ The coming of the Messiah, the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, would fulfill all that the prophet had spoken. Today we hear from another prophet who speaks to God’s people. We are fast-forwarding several generations, and now these are the ones now who have returned from that long exile far away, where they and their forebears were taken away in chains for around 70 years. They have come back, they are the beneficiaries of the promise,

¹ Je 33:15.

God has not left them in exile. His Word is good. You can count on it. Nevertheless, this prophet who is called Malachi tells us that the people are dejected. It seems they have only one question: “Where is God?” Why are they asking this question? Well, upon returning from exile the people had high hopes. Everything, they thought, would be better. Everything would be easy. But now reality has set in. They have not returned to a place of milk and honey, but a place that needs to be rebuilt from scratch. Life is not easy. Is this what they were promised? Where is God? Does He care about any of this? What emerges therefore among the people of Israel is cynicism toward God and toward His Word and toward His promises. They think God is far away and doesn’t care. They think God no longer knows them, and even worse there is no way to bridge the gap that stands between them and God.

That sure sounds familiar doesn’t it? We are a people who live in world where God is supposedly far away. This is the refrain of a popular song you might be familiar with: “God is watching us...from a distance.” Even if someone wanders into a Christian church today they are more likely than not confronted with this same idea, wrapped up in the gloss of Christianity. Many Christian churches will tell you a thoroughly unchristian idea: that God is distant and far away, and therefore He is only accessible by reason, or by an experience of emotion. That’s just another false teaching that God can be found when we curve in on ourselves. Of course what seems more near today are the habits of unbelievers. Today unbelief is the prevalent habit of mind. The personal will of choice is the “god” of our time, and ethical habits are justified simply by individual desire. When the ungodly see themselves flourish and

grow, while those who worship the one true God in Spirit and truth seem to founder in adversities, people say there is no God. Or that he is unfair. Or that he is liar. Surely the just should rule and the wicked should be subservient? But the opposite is occurring. So Malachi puts his finger on the poisonous spiritual malady that has infected the Israelites in their generational frustration with God. And he does the same for us today. The prophet says, “You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, ‘How have we wearied him?’ By saying, ‘Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.’ Or by asking, ‘Where is the God of justice?’”²

But this season of Advent gives us the answer to the question “where is the God of justice.” Another prophet, this time Isaiah, pronounces the promise of God through His Word, a Word that casts out pessimism and worldly wisdom, and in it’s place creates faith: “the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.”³ But God’s people are tired of waiting. How long? The answer becomes clear if we understand that God is not far away. God is not disinterested, merely watching from a distance. In fact God has always been near His people. He has been near to them in the messengers He has sent, through His very Word. Granted, sometimes the message they bring is not one that people want to hear. But God does speak through them, to us, and He brings us His Word. This message that they bring has always been the same. Return. Repent. Prepare. Have confidence that your

² Mal 2:17.

³ Is 30:18.

salvation is at hand and that the kingdom of God is near. The righteous will prevail and the wicked will be separated and cast off. Justice is coming. Indeed, God was near to the people through his prophet Malachi, whose very name means “my messenger” in Hebrew. And through Malachi, “my messenger,” God sends Word of two more messengers.

The first of these is John the Baptist. The prophet says that He will come and that “he will prepare the way before me.”⁴ I have no doubt that if John were among us in our time he would have no problem clearing out a room. “John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.”⁵ He spent all his time outdoors and probably wasn’t much for polite society. His job was to make ready, to prepare, to clear the way. From what? Those things that hinder faith. There are many, we have already heard about some of them. The things that stand in the way of faith are all the result of sin, of living as part of this fallen world. The doubt and the cynical attitudes of the modern world stand in the way. Self-love, human reason, one’s own wisdom, one’s own righteousness, these are also in the way. The prophet speaks of a messenger who comes to clear all of these things out of the way of faith. John said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”⁶ He prepares the way – makes straight – using the toolkit of the Lord. St. Luke tells us, “the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around

⁴ Mal 3:1.

⁵ Mt 3:4.

⁶ Jn 1:23.

the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”⁷ This is a baptism of preparation. This is a baptism that anticipates the Baptism to come, which will be “with the Holy Spirit and fire.”⁸ This is how the way must be cleared. The first messenger prepares the way for the second. Of Him the prophet whose name is “my messenger” says, “the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”⁹ The “messenger of the covenant” foretold by John and the prophets is also the Message. He comes, this is the very Word of God made flesh. Jesus brings the Kingdom of God, the forgiveness of sins and eternal life for all who believe and are Baptized. But we hear Malachi: “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?”¹⁰ And indeed the Kingdom of God is also like a heavenly smelting pot that purges out the impurities of the Old Adam. The way must be cleared, for only those who are holy and righteous can stand before God in his presence. So Christ comes in order to accomplish this for us, He puts us on the way, he leads us onto the path to righteousness and He walks with us. He is the Blacksmith who hammers us into a new image and He is also the fire that shapes us. He is not only the Purifier but the Purifying agent. The first messenger, John the Baptist, comes in order that we might know this Message, who comes to teach us His Gospel, and to lay down His life for your sins. Malachi says that when the promised Message comes “he will

7 Lk 3:2–3.

8 Lk 3:16.

9 Mal 3:1.

10 Mal 3:2.

purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.”¹¹ Sons of Levi? He’s talking about the line of priests in the Old Testament who were responsible for offering the sacrifices in the tabernacle. But you see, now that’s us, for Christ makes us a kingdom of priests who offer our sacrifices of prayer and praise here in the Divine Service. Luther says “Whoever wants to be a Christian must give himself over to being purified.” Through His Word He removes the impurities of false doctrine, all of our attempts to receive this Message on our own terms, to reveal the light of divine Truth.

In this second week of Advent we hear of this tale of two messengers. The time leading up to the celebration of the Nativity of our Lord is set aside for penitential devotion and reflection on “the way of the Lord,” the coming Jesus. Everything we associate with this season, all the pretty customs to which we have clung since childhood, all the symbols of this time of the Church Year, the Advent wreaths and candles, carols and cards, all get their meaning from the message of Advent. The Lord comes for you. Yet all of these things should be done away with and completely forgotten if they become a substitute for the true celebration of Advent. The Church lives on this message alone. She does not know of any Canadian Advent, or American Advent, or German Advent. She only knows the Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. She has waited for Him since the days of the Apostles, and she will wait until the end of the world, and she will not grow tired of praying those last Word of the New Testament: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”¹² Behold He is coming says the Lord

11 Mal 3:3.

12 Re 22:20.

Almighty. He is coming, He will be with His people in His Temple, His Body, the Holy Church, and He brings the covenant of eternal life.

Until then our life moves through the worries, cares, and temptations of the world. These things become encrusted on the image of God which is restored and imprinted on us at our Baptism. Over time, sin and doubt corrodes and corrupts. So God refines and purifies us. In repentance and faith we turn back to Him, and we receive anew the blessings He comes to give us. In repentance and faith we turn away from all of our doubt and unbelief and cynicism and turn toward a loving God who ever draws us near, through Word and Sacrament. Jesus comes as the one who was scourged clean on the cross, but not for His sins – for yours and mine. He will be subject to death and hell in our stead, in order that we might have the righteousness we lack. The obedient passion of our Lord is the one sacrifice for all time, “pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.”¹³ The God who was near to his people through his messengers now comes in Person and is among us as one of us. He is near. He has raised us again to new life in the waters of our Baptism and comes to us in His very Body and Blood. And through His Word we hear again that our sins are forgiven.

The Lord says through Malachi, “I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.”¹⁴ So have no doubt about the character of the messenger or the Message. Sin, unworthiness, a world in which people live as though God is far

13 Mal 3:4.

14 Mal 3:6.

away, none of these will hold back this truth. God promises freely. You see, God is not so far away that we cannot return to him. God never left. Now, today, he comes to us. The Lord's unchanging promise is to love and forgive and provide even in a time when he might seem far away. This is why he returns us to himself. This is why the promised Message, Jesus Christ the Son of God, comes. So we pray, come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.

And now the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Rev. Kirk P. Radford

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✠ Soli Deo Gloria