

*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. But 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. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. Malachi 3:1-4*

A true story is told about a grade-one teacher who was having a really difficult day in that it was a dark, cloudy day and it rained the entire day and the children began the day restless and hyperactive, which grew more intense as the day wore on. And so the teacher couldn't wait for the bell to ring at 3 o'clock. About 2:45 she saw it was still raining, and so she decided to start getting the kids ready for dismissal - and she sorted out their boots and raincoats and started helping get them on. Finally, they were ready to go, all except for one little boy whose boots were just too small for his feet. There were no zippers or straps, and it took every last ounce of strength she had to get them on. But when at last she did get them on, as she straightened up with a sigh of relief, the little boy looked down at his feet and said, "Teacher, you know what? These boots aren't mine!" The teacher didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but she smiled bravely and started taking them off - and they were harder to get off than they were to put on. She yanked and tugged until the boots finally came off, and its then the little boy smiled at her and said, "These not my boots - but they're my sister's, and I got to wear them today!"

Patience. The Cambridge English Dictionary defines patience as “the ability to wait, or to continue doing something despite difficulties, or to suffer without complaining or becoming annoyed.” If that is the true meaning of patience, and I think most of us believe that it is, we, as human beings created in the image of God, are clearly lacking of the meaning of patience and void of the spirit of patience. We see that in our constant agitation and our consistent indignation to have things happen and done for us, if not immediately, but as soon as possible – so as not in any way to interrupt or disrupt the frenzied, frantic, hectic, overscheduled life that we have created for ourselves, which is focused on ourselves, so we might know the fulfillment and the satisfaction of life *without God*.

Now some of us here today may push back on that statement, in that we may have numerous Christian activities scheduled into our busy lives. But, as I was reminded at my first-year review in seminary - by a wise, seasoned, godly pastor who we also a professor, “Leland – when it comes to your relationship with God, *activity is not devotion*.” The psalmist proclaims this in Psalm 46:10, where in the midst of all the frantic activity in the world we live in, God Himself declares: “*Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!*” Beneath the façade and pretense of our busy lives, lies a divine soul that created by God in the image of God, but which constantly wrestles with the remnants of a fallen, sinful nature that seeks to reign in our hearts, taking the place of God. Impatience is rebellion against God by rejecting the sovereign, providential timing of God's purpose, plan and will.

There is no patience equal to the patience of God. Consider that God created the heavens, earth, sun, moon and every living thing in five days; and then God created a human being in His image from the dust of the ground in one day; and after God rested, humanity fell into sin by rejecting God by rebelling against God – and *ever since then, God has been working on restoring us to back him*. South African pastor Andrew Murray saw God's patience this way: “A doctor was once asked by a patient who had met with a serious accident, ‘Doctor, how long shall I have to lie here? The answer: ‘Only a day at a time.’ This was the same lesson God had recorded for His people of all ages, long before: The day's portion in its day. When we are faithful for one short day, long years will take care of themselves.”

This morning we continue in the season of Advent, which is traditionally observed in many Christian churches as a time of *expectant waiting* and preparation for the celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, on Christmas Day. The word “advent” is a version of the Latin word which mean "the coming" - which, by implication, also means “waiting” for that which is coming. What this meant for the chosen people of God in the nation of Israel, was the *expectant waiting* and preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of God - which would be the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies that foretold of coming King who would also come as the long-promised Messiah, which happened through the miraculous incarnational birth of God, who entered the world in the physical human form of Jesus.

In the Bible we read of a number of God’s prophets who preached messages that clearly revealed Jesus Christ to be the promised, long-awaited Messiah. Last Sunday we looked at the prophetic message given by God to the prophet Hosea, who declared the depth of God’s love for His people, a persistent love that tolerates no rivals, but also an unrelenting love that causes God to relentlessly pursue His chosen people - even in the midst of their blatant, self-centered rebelling, rejecting, running away from God. This was a stunning act of God’s loving grace, as the people of God in Hosea’s day had responded to God’s love with the rebellion and rejection of God, by violating their marriage-like relationship with God, with the spiritual adultery, which is loving of worshipping or getting our greatest joy from anyone or anything else than God, which in Hosea’s day was God’s people worshipping the gods and idols of the pagans. As we open the pages of the book of Malachi today, we find ourselves about 300 years after Hosea spoke for God to the people of God regarding their *spiritual adultery* –During that time, because of their spiritual adultery, God had allowed the Jews in the northern kingdom of Israel to be conquered and taken into exile by the Assyrians in 722 BC - *and* God also had allowed the Jews of the southern kingdom of Judah to be conquered and taken into exile by the Babylonians in 586 BC. And so, after 40 years, as God continued to relentlessly love His people, the first wave of Jewish exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem and they began to rebuild the temple, but they soon gave up. But, inspired by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, God’s people finally completed the task about 20 years later.

But all was still not well with God’s people. While the preaching and spiritual leadership of Haggai and Zechariah had brought the completion of the temple, God’s people once began to wander in their faith with God, as everything they had done for God had not produced God’s promised blessings and the messianic age they had expected. The initial warm response to Zechariah’s call to repentance had grown cold as they expectantly had waited for God to fulfill His promises to His people. By the time God called on Malachi to speak to His people, their hearts were far from God. While the temple had been finished, their worship had become wearisome; the spiritual leadership of the priests became corrupt; divorce was accepted and became routine; the intermarriage with unbelievers was practiced and promoted; they became possessive of their money and possessions and their prosperous life styles – causing them to withhold their giving to God, and oppressing the poor for their own personal gain and position. Into this God called “Malachi” (whose name means “my messenger”) to proclaim the message of the reality and patience of God’s holy wrath and in the midst of God’s relentless love for His people.

There are significant similarities between Malachi’s day and our day today. The days of Malachi were days of waiting for God to fulfill his promises. The prophet Haggai had prophesied that the splendor and grandeur of the new temple would be greater than the old, and that treasures from all the nations would fill it. The prophet Zechariah had proclaimed that the Messianic king of the new Kingdom of God would come to them; and God would flood them with His forgiveness; and a spirit of prayer would descend on them for their repentance; and many nations would join them; and God would be with. But now the temple was finished. Time had passed. Some of the great men and women of faith, who gave their all rebuilding the temple, were dead and gone - and God has not come to His temple! The hope of God that fires the people of God to be pure and take risks and give themselves to the venture of great things with God was fading. We still see this today, as many who claim Jesus Christ struggle to press on with a passionate, sacrificial, expectant faith - when they see all that is going on in our world.

About this, John Piper wrote: “The great temptation for Israel in the Old Testament and for the church of Christ today is to forget that we are pilgrims not natives in this world. The temptation is to let the Lord’s delay make us settle into the world and become passive as we wait; to forget that we are aliens and exiles, sojourners, strangers on the earth, seeking another homeland, desiring and yearning for a better country (Hebrews 11:13–16). The great threat to the church . . . is not that we are persecuted and homeless and driven about like refugees; *but that we are so much at home here*. We have let the Lord’s delay put us to sleep: no sense of urgency, no earnest expectation, no heart-wrenching cry: “Come, Lord Jesus!” No passionate mission strategy to penetrate the un-evangelized peoples who must be reached before he comes. And inevitably, when the urgent zeal for the name of God fades, so does the moral power to be pure. And where there was once Master-God, there returns master-mammon and master-sex. So it was in Malachi’s day, and so it is today.”

We hear these words and we confess our desperate need for God and our surrendered openness to listen to God and sacrificially respond to God so we might be witnesses of God and messengers of God, so that many would experience the coming of the Kingdom of God during this Advent season, as we celebrate the relentless love of God and miraculous patience of God in incarnational birth of God who entered the world in the human form of Jesus - the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies that foretold of coming King who would also come as the long-awaited Messiah. “O God forgive us for our complacency toward the lost. Forgive us for the smallness of our vision. Forgive us for the weakness of our spiritual lives. Touch us, O God, with your light and your fire! Tune our hearts, O God, to sing the glory of your praise! Teach us, O God, about the thrill of dying to ourselves and living fully for you. Give us, O God, a heart-transforming encounter with the crucified and risen Jesus Christ that will banish every doubt and remove every fear and fill us with the deep humbleness and the joyful confidence and the brazen boldness - to surrender to the Holy Spirit so that He might unleash His power and His freedom and His glory into our lives and into our church and into our community and into our country and into our evil-infested, trouble-laden, sin-saturated world we live - so that world might know the fullness of the hope, grace, mercy, forgiveness, joy, peace and relentless love and abundant life of Jesus as Lord and Savior.

From the beginning of when sin and evil entered the world, God promised He would send a Savior into the world who would sacrificially defeat the sin and evil in the hearts and lives of His people - even in the midst of our impatient, blatant, self-centered, rebelling, rejecting, running away from God. This is the message of the heart of God, who called the prophet Malachi to proclaim to a people of God, who were persistently wandering away from God. We clearly see the spirit of that message in Malachi.

In Malachi 1 the prophet begins to address their spiritual adultery by pointing out their sin of doubting God’s love for them. Malachi 1:2 God declares: “*I have loved you*” But God’s people respond by saying, “*How have you loved us?*” Or in other words: “Prove it!” Doubting God’s love is the beginning of unbelief and disobedience. Eve doubted God’s love and ate of the forbidden tree because she thought God was holding out on her. God responded to “*How have you loved us?*” by telling His people that He graciously chose Jacob, their father, and rejected Esau, who was a much better man than Jacob. He also love them by judging Esau’s descendants and gave Israel the best of the lands. And he also loved them in that while their sins polluted the land, God rescued them from captivity and led them back home.

After this God then confronts the priests, the spiritual leaders of God’s people – in that they were not giving honor to God’s name but rather they were taking the best given to God for themselves. They did not value the spiritual privileges God gave them and they did not bring their best for the sacrifices. God gave them His very best, and He asked for their best in return, but they kept the best for themselves. God rebukes them in Malachi 1:10: “*Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand.*” These words are not only for spiritual leaders, but for all who follow Jesus. 1 Peter 2:5 tells us we are all to “*offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*”

In Malachi 2 God again confronts His spiritual leaders, this time regarding their sin of defiling the promise of His covenant with them. It was no light thing to be a priest. It was a gracious gift of God through His covenant with Levi. Verses 5–7 describe the ideal priest. He fears and obeys God. He receives the Word and teaches it. He lives what he teaches. He seeks to turn others from sin. But the priests in Malachi’s day were leading people away from God: *“You have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways but show partiality in your instruction”* (vs. 8-9). This is a warning to us all. Our walk must match our talk.

After this God points out another sin of the priests: they divorced their Jewish wives and married heathen women. In Malachi 2:15-16 we read: *“Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.”* The sin of spiritual adultery against God seeks to destroy the very basic foundation and definition of the family. This is abundantly clear today. Marriage is a holy, sacred union with God. God hates divorce because it is the breaking of the covenant promise made between husband and wife and God. Malachi closes this section (vs 17) by declaring: *“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?’”* In these words we read of a people of God, who have just been confronted with their sin, scornfully ask: “Will God punish us for our sins? Does He really care?” Well, God answers them by promising to send His messengers to announce the coming of the fulfillment of the covenant promise of God, who would be the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies that foretold of coming King who would also come as the long-promised Messiah. Jesus did come into the temple and expose its sins and purify its courts. In His ministry Jesus confronted the same sins of the religious leaders, so much so that they ultimately crucified Him.

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In these words we read of three messengers the coming of the Kingdom of God through the promised, long awaited Messiah. The first messenger God will send *“will prepare the way”* for the long-awaited Messiah: *“I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.”* The second messenger God will send is God Himself: *“And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.”* The phrase *“the Lord whom you seek”* refers back to the seeking of Malachi 2:17 where they ask, *“Where is the God of justice?”* The third messenger God will send is the *“messenger of the covenant.”* On the one hand, this person seems to be the same as the *“Lord”* who comes to his temple. But on the other hand, he is spoken of in the third person by God: *“He is coming, says the Lord.”* So he seems to be distinct from God.

The first messenger is identified for us in Malachi 4:5-6. The messenger who prepares the way of the Lord is called Elijah: *“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”* In Luke 1:16-17, an angel told Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, *“And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”*

The first messenger is John the Baptist. Jesus confirms this in Matthew 11:10. In speaking of John, Jesus said: *“This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’”* Jesus affirms this again in Matthew 17:12: *“But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.”* John the Baptist is the fulfillment of the first messenger in Malachi 3:1.

The second messenger is God Himself: *“And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.”* Now from the standpoint of the New Testament we can see why *“the Lord”* and the *“messenger of the covenant”* seem distinct on the one hand, and seem identical on the other. The ambiguity can be cleared up by remembering that is that Jesus Christ is the Messiah - *but He is also God*. We see that in the Gospel of John in John 1:1 when we read that *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”* and then John 1:14 we read that, *“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* We also see this in Isaiah 9:6, which says: *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* And so, the second messenger is *Jesus as God* and the third messenger is *God as Jesus*.

After this great proclamation and promise of God, Malachi 3 moves back to again confronting God’s people about the sin of disobeying the Word of God. The people had disobeyed God by robbing Him of tithes and offerings. Actually, when God’s people are not faithful in their giving, they not only rob God, but they also rob themselves. God had shut off the rain and spoiled their crops because of their selfishness. Tithing, of course, is not “making a bargain with God”; but God does promise to bless and care for those who are faithful in their stewardship. God knows the fallen human heart and He knows our infatuation with money. Jesus spoke more about money than he did Heaven and Hell combined – in fact Jesus spoke more about money than any other subject besides the "Kingdom of God." Of Jesus’ 39 parables, eleven are about finances. There is a reason that 1 Timothy 6:10 tells that: *“The love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”* Loving money more than God is spiritual adultery.

*Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name. “They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.”*

*“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.*

*“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.*

*“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” Malachi 3:16–4:6*

Malachi closes his message with some wonderful promises to the faithful. There was that faithful remnant in this day who did not forsake God’s house, but who met together for mutual blessing - they are *“my treasured possession”* says the Lord. What a beautiful picture of the true follower of Jesus Christ. Treasured possessions are precious, and in Christ we are precious in God’s sight. Jesus purchased us with His blood. He is polishing us so we might shine for Him, with trials and testings. One day in glory we shall shine in the fullness of His beauty and His splendor, forever and ever!

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is pictured here as the *“Sun of Righteousness.”* To the church, He is the *“Bright and Morning Star”* (Revelation 22:16, for He will appear when the hour is darkest to take His church home. But to Israel, He is the Sun, bringing the *“Day of the Lord,”* a day that will mean burning to the lost, but healing to saved Jews and Gentiles. This is the message God called the prophet Malachi to share with a people of God who were persistently wandering away from God - and a people who did not know God who were rejecting God by persistently running away from God. The last word in our English Old Testament is *“utter destruction.”* At the end of the New Testament we read, *“No longer will there be anything accursed”* (Revelation 22:3). The difference? The crucified and risen Jesus Christ!

The purpose of Christmas is to purify a priestly people who live for the glory of God’s name. But not just live, also leap: God says in 4:2, *“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”* When we open our eyes to the glory of the name of the mighty God and set ourselves to love God above all else, we will go forth leaping with the freedom of a newborn calf. Free from the love of money; free from marital faithlessness; free to lift our hands in praise to the Savior; free to discover the thrill of godliness and love; free to live for God and follow Jesus Christ and know the power of the Holy Spirit in this life and forever!

*“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star. The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. Revelation 22:16-17*

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