

“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the LORD Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them.”² But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.³ Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,” says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 4:1-3)

What will Judgment Day be Like?

When I came into my office on Wednesday morning and found the bulletin there waiting for me to review, I glanced down and saw what Sunday of the church year today is. A thought occurred to me: is it a coincidence that the Sunday after election day is called Last Judgment? Right now, roughly one half of the population of the United States might feel that way. Some people are deeply invested in politics and for those who are the Republicans, re-electing President Obama might have felt like a sign of the end of the world. But they don't have a monopoly on those feelings. Just a week or two before the election, Joss Whedon, the director of the movie *The Avengers*, warned that electing Governor Romney would bring on the zombie apocalypse. The apocalypse, of course, is another name for Judgment Day. Why would we use those kinds of terms for losing an election? Well, if you had strong feelings about this race, you probably believed that losing it would be bad for the country. And in our culture, Judgment Day is shorthand for planetary destruction and the end of all life. If you're my age, you may remember that the second Terminator movie was called *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. But is that popular culture perspective on Judgment Day accurate? I don't know if you've noticed, but not everything that Hollywood tells us is true. That definitely applies to the end of the world. Today is the Sunday that we dedicate every year to putting aside the pop culture images and reminding ourselves what God actually says about Judgment Day. It's purely coincidence that we're doing it on the Sunday after election day, but perhaps the depths of feeling that event provokes will give us the opportunity to think more deeply about this issue. **What will Judgment Day be like?**

I.

Malachi tells us. Malachi wrote the last book of the Old Testament and this is almost the end of his book. So as God is winding up the Old Testament and preparing to leave Israel in silence for four hundred years until John the Baptist comes, he reminds them of Judgment Day. What does he say? **“‘Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘Not a root or a branch will be left to them.’”** Again and again the scriptures warn us that “the day” is coming and we all know what day we're talking about! But doesn't it sound ominous to say it that way?

Malachi, like most of the Old Testament prophets, begins more or less where all those pop culture references begin: with destruction and fear. He says that the day will burn like a furnace. Of course, in his day, furnaces weren't these quiet, electronically controlled machines in our basements. For Malachi, a furnace was a place where you built a fire. You had to feed it and you could see the flames consuming everything you put in. You could feel the heat and if you weren't careful, you could walk away with a burn that might scar you for life. Malachi speaks of that kind of blazing fire and he calls all the arrogant and evildoers stubble. Stubble is what's leftover in a field after the farmer harvests his grain. It's the dried up stalks of the plants. If you throw them into a fire, the flames flare up and the stubble is gone. The destruction of Judgment Day will be so complete that God says that the arrogant won't have a root or branch left to them. In my family, we often camp on vacation and we always like to make a fire. But it's hard to burn all the wood up. There's always a charred log left over because the fire cools and goes out. But on Judgment Day, the fire will be so intense that nothing will be left.

That's a pretty intense picture, isn't it? It represents the final step on Judgment Day when God destroys the world as we know it and he sends the arrogant and the evildoers to hell. But maybe we should back up and review how we'll get to that final step. Jesus describes the world as coasting along, feeling secure, like nothing is ever going to change, even though he also describes a world of wars and rumors of wars, of natural disasters and persecutions and falling away. Those terrible things will continue to happen. Yet, sinful man will continue

to believe that there is no real day of reckoning coming. But then suddenly, when people least expect it, a trumpet will blast and everyone on earth will hear it. They'll all look up and see Jesus coming with the angels of heaven. He will call the dead out of their graves. Every person who ever lived will rise and their souls and bodies will be reunited. The angels will gather all the living together with the resurrected dead and then Jesus judge the world. The unbelievers will be sent to hell forever while the believers will enter eternal life. And then the world as we know will cease to exist and God will give us a new heavens and a new earth. All that will happen in an instant.

Malachi, like so many of the Old Testament prophets, hammers away at the destruction and the judgment and the fear. He does it for a reason: most of the time in the Old Testament God is warning people who don't want to listen. He tells them what is going to happen to them. He makes it scary because he wants sinners to be afraid of where their lives are going and what their attitudes are going to mean on Judgment Day so that they repent. But does God want us to be afraid?

Well, are we part of the arrogant and the evildoers? On one level, the answer has to be yes. We all do evil every single day. St. Paul said that the good that he wanted to do, that he did not do. But the evil that he didn't want to do, that he did over and over again. If St. Paul had to admit that, we all have to admit the same thing, right? We are sinners, born and bred. And even though we know better, we sin every day. Even if most of the people around us would say that we're good people, we still have to deal with the arrogance that Malachi condemns here.

In our society, we consider pride to be a virtue. We think that we're supposed to instill pride in our children. But notice that God sends the arrogant to hell forever. The Hebrew word Malachi uses speaks of a person who is presumptuous, a person who takes on themselves rights and privileges they don't deserve. In a sinful world, it's talking about people who put themselves in God's place. It's talking about people who think that what they want and what they feel and what they think is every bit as important as what God says. In the end, don't we all have to plead guilty to that? Every time we struggle with what the Bible says, aren't we trying to put our thoughts and feelings ahead of God's Word? Every time we sin, aren't we putting what we want ahead of what he tells us to do or not to do? Isn't every sinful lust and desire, presumptuous and arrogant? The truth is, my friends, if God sends the arrogant and the evildoers to hell, he has to send us, too. **What will judgment day be like? It will be a day of terror.**

II.

But there is a very important word at the beginning of second verse of this text. Do you know what it is? "But." God says that he will consume the arrogant and the evildoer will fire **"But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall."** With that word "but" God changes the whole tenor of "the day." In fact, after these verses were written, God changed the way he presented Judgment Day. The New Testament emphasizes the positive, the comforting, the joy of Judgment Day. It does that because in the New Testament, God is talking to different people. He's talking to believers who take refuge in Christ.

He's talking to you. You are the people who revere his name. You trust in him to rescue you. Yes, we are born sinners and our sinful pride infects all that we do. I'm sure that my pride has offended you on more than one occasion. We do deserve death and hell because that pride contaminates our hearts and all too often we act on it. But Jesus came and he paid for that pride. He lived a perfect life of humility and service to God. He never sinned once. And then he died for our pride and our evil deeds. Because he did, God looks at us differently. Because God has given us faith in Jesus, when Judgment Day comes, he will not look at our pride. He will not look at our evil deeds. He will look at Jesus and call us perfect.

Malachi says that the sun of righteousness will rise. To the people of Malachi's day, sunrise was a big deal. They didn't have electric lights in their homes. Oil lamps were expensive and difficult to maintain and easy to turn over. You only used them when you had to. It was dark at night. And scary. It was easy to fear the things that were out there in the night – the wolves, the criminals, the devil. But sunrise brought relief. You could see. You could work. You could feel safe again. Judgment Day is sunrise for us. After the long night of sin and horror and death, after this world as we know it reaches its end, Judgment Day comes and the dawn breaks and the waiting is over. It's day time and all the fears of this life are done.

But the sun that rises on that day is not the physical sun. It's Jesus. He rises on Judgment Day. He returns and he brings healing in his wings. When Jesus comes back, he will make us whole. All that is wrong

with this world will come to an end. Death and pain and sorrow will die. God will set us free from the sin and the pride that lurk in our hearts and we will be perfect Christians for the first time in our lives. Then we will let go of all the hurt and sorrow. All the guilt, all the regrets, all the resentments over things we couldn't have and all the damage that other people's sin has done to us – Jesus will wipe all that away. He will heal our hearts. In fact, we'll be so happy that we'll leap for joy like a calf that's been penned up leaps when it gets outside.

God adds one more thing about that day: **“Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,” says the LORD Almighty.**” In this life, we don't always win. For people who think that the point of elections is to restore a Christian society here in the United States, this has been a rough week. I read an editorial the other day that said that the problem with conservatives is that they are Christians, but our society is more and more non-Christian. No matter how conservative non-Christians are, they aren't comfortable voting for people who insist on Christianity. In a sinful world, we cannot vote Christianity into power in the United States. We cannot make our country follow God by controlling the congress or the presidency. In fact, God promises us persecution and attacks from the powers that be. The day may come when we will see Christians treated like second class citizens even here in America.

But even if that happens, it can't last. When Jesus comes back, we believers who get trampled so often down here, will win. God promises nothing in this life but the attacks of the devil and he calls us to carry our cross. But when the Lord returns, he will give us victory. Jesus will come out of the shadows and openly rule the world. He will send his enemies to hell forever. And he will invite us to stand next to him and celebrate the victory. Never again will we suffer like we do now. **What will Judgment Day be like? It will be a day of healing and victory.**

So no matter who won the election, Judgment Day is coming. Each day brings it closer. But the popular image of the end of the world is not based on what God promises us. It's based on the things Jesus says will happen before Judgment Day – the wars and rumors of wars, the famines and disasters, and so on. And it's based on what God says will happen to unbelievers – they will suffer hell forever. But for us, Judgment Day isn't scary at all. Jesus tells us to lift up our heads and welcome that day because it's the beginning of an eternity of joy. It's the end of suffering and sorrow. It's the fulfillment of all that God promised us. So, of course, it's something we look forward to as we struggle with the disappointments and hurts of this life. It gives us hope. That's the way it's supposed to be. Amen.