

“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.

⁴ *“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.*

⁵ *“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.⁶ He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.” (Malachi 4:1-6)*

Christ is Coming!

There are times in history that are just exciting to be a part of. Henry Adams, the great-grandson of President John Adams, was a young man during the Civil War. He wrote that he felt like he had lived a lifetime in the first year of the war. The 60's are a decade that casts a long shadow over our country, in part because so many things were happening. Today, if you lived in a country like Egypt or Libya or Syria, the so-called “Arab Spring” must seem like an incredible time to be alive. But in every era of exciting change, there is the possibility that things could go horribly wrong. During the first years of the Civil War, you couldn't say for sure if the Union would survive. During the 60's, change was in the air, but some people also felt that it was time for a revolution. Who knows what the future holds for the Arab world? Exciting times are unpredictable by nature. This morning, in the prophet Malachi, God calls our attention to the most exciting times our world will ever see. Since he knows how much anxiety is a part of excitement, he tells us how it will all come out.

Christ is coming!

I.

Malachi begins with the most exciting day of all: the end of the world. But he skips over the events that lead up to that day – the wars and rumors of war, the earthquakes and famines. Those sound like the kind of gripping stories journalists would kill to cover. But Malachi focuses on Judgment Day and on how much we will gain from that day. **Christ is coming to heal you!**

Now, Malachi starts right where you would expect an Old Testament prophet to start: with judgment on God's enemies. He says that the day of the Lord will burn like a furnace and he pictures the evildoers and the arrogant as stubble, going up in smoke! God says, **“Not a root or a branch will be left to them.”** Nothing that they accomplished here, nothing that they enjoyed here will last. They will go to hell with no hope of deliverance. Why does God's judgment fall so hard on those people? Malachi calls them “arrogant.” The word he uses here literally means to boil. Like water rises up in the pot when it begins to boil, human pride boils up. It inflates our sense of importance. It leads to rebellion against God and to making ourselves our own masters. When you have that attitude, you do evil. Needless to say, arrogant evildoers have very little sympathy for believers. They're the people who mock us for living the way God wants us to. They view us as people who don't have any imagination and who are too afraid to live a little. Of course, ultimately, they lash out at us because they hate to see our faith and our way of life.

On Judgment Day, they will get what they have coming from God. Now, we don't want to misuse these words. The sin of pride is just as dangerous for us as it is for them. If we're honest, we have to admit that we often fall into that sin. But God's point here is that in this sinful world, every faithful believer will suffer. Most of the time, people who have real power here are the people who are ruthless enough to get it. People who try to live their faith and who worry about other people get run over by people who are dedicated to putting themselves first. The more we try to live for Christ, the more we're going to run headlong into unbelievers who take advantage of us. But on Judgment Day, all those who enjoyed putting God's people down will pay.

Then Malachi says, **“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.”** What does “the sun of righteousness will rise” mean? Jesus will return. He is the sun of righteousness. I'm not saying that because in English the word for the sun in the sky happens to sound like the word for a male child. Rather, the New

Testament calls Jesus the light of the world. It calls him the morning star and refers to his return as the day dawning. In fact, even the translation “sun of righteousness” leaves a little to be desired. It’s clearer if we translate this phrase “the righteous sun.” When Christ returns, the Savior who was perfect in our place will bring a new and perfect world. All sin will flee before him, even the sin that still lurks in our hearts.

Malachi says that he will have healing in his wings. What are the wings of the sun? The Hebrew expression seems to refer to its rays. Sometimes in the first few days after a baby is born, it comes down with jaundice. The skin takes on a yellowish tinge and it can be quite dangerous if it’s not dealt with. Do you know what the cure is? Sunlight. Doctors will tell you to lay your baby naked in direct sun for a few hours every day and that takes care of it. When the righteous sun rises on Judgment Day, he will bring true healing. He will drive away the jaundice of sin that has corrupted us. He will heal us of all the sinful desires that lurk in our hearts. At last, we won’t enjoy sinning anymore. And he will heal us of all that sin has done to us. He will cure all the damage we do to our own lives by our own sinful choices and lusts. He will heal all the hurts that other people’s sin have caused – the deliberate acts and the accidents. He will heal all that’s wrong with this sinful world and make it a new and holy place inhabited by holy people.

The effect on us will be dramatic. Malachi pictures us as a calves released from a stall, running and jumping in joy in the bright sunshine. That’s the new sinless “us.” Then Malachi says that we will trample the wicked. We will grind them like ashes under our feet. Part of the final act of this world is Christ showing who really was on top: his people. We will live and reign with him forever. That’s the day we’re looking forward to. There will never be another day like that one!

II.

But Malachi doesn’t only speak about the exciting last day. He moves seamlessly from that day to another exciting time in the history of the church: Jesus’ first coming. He can do that because from his perspective, there really wasn’t much difference. First of all, both comings lay centuries in the future. They were both a promise Malachi had to trust in. Even more to the point, the purpose of both was the same. Jesus died the first time so that we will live forever. So in the Old Testament, God often leads the prophets to move back and forth between the two comings almost as if they were one. But they were two comings. And these words that we have before us are the last words of the Old Testament. After Malachi finished these six verses, no prophet would appear in Israel until John the Baptist came. So God led him to write about those exciting days when John appeared to prepare the way for Jesus. Even though we live thousands of years later, the message of Malachi and John is the message of Christ working for us. **Christ is coming to make you part of his family.**

Malachi said, “**See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.**” Elijah was long dead when Malachi wrote these words. In fact, Malachi lived almost exactly halfway between Elijah and Jesus. In the gospel lesson for today, the leaders of Israel asked John the Baptist if he was Elijah – thinking of this prophecy. John said no. But later, Jesus said that John was indeed the Elijah who was to come. Why did John say he wasn’t Elijah? Because the leaders of Jesus’ day had the wrong idea about Elijah. They imagined that when God said that Elijah would come, the actual prophet himself would come back from heaven. But that was never God’s intention. When the angel Gabriel told John’s parents that he would be born, he referenced this prophecy, but explained that John would go forward in the spirit and the power of Elijah. Like, Elijah, John was a powerful preacher who challenged kings with the truth of the gospel.

And his role was to point his people to Jesus. Malachi wrote: “**He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.**” What does that mean? Turning the hearts of the children to their fathers refers to John’s call to return to the faith of their fathers, the faith of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Turning the hearts of the fathers to their children means turning the people spiritually to concern for the faith of generations to come. In a very poetic way, Malachi is speaking of fellowship and family in the church. John came to restore the gospel in an age that had fallen into the worst kind of legalism. John came to call them to turn from that kind of sin and to recognize their Savior.

It’s easy for us to sit back and condemn the leaders of Jesus’ day who failed to recognize him or John because they were so steeped in their own made up laws that they could no longer understand the true word of God. But anytime we find it easy to throw stones at the failings of other generations, we should stop and ask ourselves if we’re any better. The sin that Malachi condemned at the beginning of this reading was pride. The

sin that John encountered when he fulfilled this prophecy was pride. The sin that the devil always has the most success with is pride and that is true for us today as well.

Do we WELS members walk around with an attitude that says, “I thank you Lord that we in the WELS are not like other men with all their doctrinal problems”? Do we congratulate ourselves on our doctrinal purity and think that we have somehow kept the faith and earned eternal life? Jesus and John both fought against that kind of self-righteous attitude. And we must learn the difference between faithfully following the truth and thinking that because we do everything right in the WELS, we’re going to heaven. There is no guarantee that we will never have doctrinal problems in our church body. In every district, pastors have fallen into error and had to be dismissed. In every congregation that I’ve served, there have been members who did not know all that the Bible teaches and didn’t really want to know. I’ve encountered many Lutherans who figure that doctrine is the pastor’s job.

And I’ve encountered many Lutherans who looked down their noses at other churches – which is different from a healthy concern for Christians being led astray. The difference is sinful pride. Are you guilty of that sin? Are you guilty of hearing me preach the law and looking around and saying, “You guys really need to hear this!”? Sinful pride shows itself in many different ways. It’s sneaky and we fall into it often without even realizing that we have. Can any of us claim that we are innocent of this most basic of all human sins?

We are all guilty. We all need a Savior. Jesus came because we proud sinners all deserve God’s wrath in hell forever. Our Father loves us. So he sent John to point to Jesus. Then he sent Jesus to die on the cross and pay for all that sinful pride and the sins that came from that pride. Then Jesus rose and God erased all record of our sinful pride. God sent that good news to us and gave us faith. For as long as we live here, that gospel message will fight against the pride in our hearts. And then when that most exciting day of all arrives and the sun of righteousness rises – when Christ appears, he will heal our hearts of all sin and guilt. He will set us free from the sinful nature inside us that keeps leading us back into sin. And he will take us to live with him forever.

Until that day comes, he calls us to live for him. For Israel, that meant living according to the Old Testament covenant. We’re free from that covenant because Jesus fulfilled it. But God still calls us to live for him, to love each other, to serve the good of the gospel. Day by day, we show that Christ has come and made us a part of his family of faith by living the way God calls us to.

Is your life exciting? Do we live in times in which it’s exciting to be alive? We’ve lived our entire lives in the end times, the times Jesus spoke of. Every day of our lives, God allows wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and disasters, false doctrine and false Christs to appear to remind us that the end is coming. And he sends the gospel out into all the world and through that message Jesus comes. One day soon, the greatest day of all will dawn and Christ will come again. Until that day comes, live for him. Amen.