

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

² *But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap.* ³ *He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness,* ⁴ *and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.* (Malachi 3:1-4)

Peace Requires Preparation

Have you ever had a recurring dream – something that you dreamed about over and over again? I have one. It doesn’t happen every night. But I’ve had on and off for years. It’s Sunday morning and I did write a sermon, but somehow I never got around to memorizing it. So I have to stand up and try to remember what I wrote. Usually, I wake up before I find out what you thought about me winging it. Where do recurring dreams come from? At least sometimes, they come from anxiety that we have about situations we’re going to face. Job interviews might make you really nervous. If you’re a teenage boy, the idea of asking a pretty girl out on a date might cause you a lot of anxiety. Big business meetings and tests in school and testifying in court can all cause anxiety. What can we do about that? In some of those situations, preparation can help. Practicing interviews can lower your anxiety. Studying can lower your test anxiety. Actually memorizing my sermon will hopefully keep me from waking up at 3 am after dreaming I wasn’t ready. Now, we can’t prepare for every scary situation. But in many situations, it helps. This morning, we want to make a spiritual connection. We can still have peace in all those situations because we know our Savior and his love for us. But to have that peace our faith has to be ready to face those situations. **Peace requires preparation.**

I.

To have peace in this life, we have to first have peace regarding the situation that should cause sinners the greatest anxiety: answering to God for our sins. Our reading from the Old Testament prophet Malachi is all about meeting God in peace. **Peace requires preparation. God prepares us for Judgment Day.**

Malachi was the last of the Old Testament prophets. He wrote about four hundred years before Jesus was born. But through him, God promised that he would send a new prophet just before Jesus came. Malachi – whose name means “my messenger” – called that prophet a messenger. In fact, in our lesson for today, he talks about two messengers: **“See, I will send my messenger,”** – that’s the first one – **“who will prepare the way before me.”** That’s John the Baptist who prepared Israel to see Jesus. But Malachi continues, **“Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.** So the second messenger is “the Lord you are seeking” – it’s Jesus himself.

Why does Malachi call Jesus a messenger? Because only in Jesus can we find the message of life and forgiveness – the message that brings us true peace. Jesus is what every true messenger, every prophet and apostle, every pastor and teacher is really sent to proclaim. Jesus says, “He who listens to you, listens to me.” So Jesus works through every pastor who offers you peace in Christ. Jesus works every time you parents read Bible stories to your children and answer their spiritual questions. And Jesus works every time we share the gospel with someone out there who needs to hear it. He is the messenger who works through us messengers.

And what did he come here to proclaim? Peace. Now, Malachi does not actually use the word peace in this reading. He actually goes the other way. He says, **“But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap.”** Does that sound to you like Bethlehem? Was it hard for the shepherds to stand in the stable and see the baby in the manger? Was it hard to endure the light blasting out of the manger? Of course not. There was no light blasting out of the manger and the only fear the shepherds experienced that night was when the angels came to tell them to go see that baby and understand that hidden inside that infant’s body was Christ the Lord. They may have been amazed that God was hiding in that child, but they didn’t tremble or find it difficult to stand before him.

But when Jesus comes back, he won’t be born in a stable or laid in a manger. He won’t grow up as a carpenter’s son or be a wandering preacher and certainly, no one is going to try to scourge him or nail him to a cross. He will appear in glory to judge the world. Everyone will suddenly understand that they now have to

face the Son of God and pay for their sins. Who could stand on that day? Certainly not us, at least, not on the basis of our lives. Sure, most people probably think we're "good" people. We may even know people who respect us for trying to live our faith. But it's faith that we're living because you and I know that we are still sinners. Every single day, we fall short of the standard that God sets for us, as parents, as children, as spouses, as workers, as church members. During this Advent season, we're trying to encourage everyone to reach out with the gospel. How many of us just feel guilty when we hear that because we know how many opportunities we've missed and how hard it is for us to share that message? We're just not the messengers God calls us to be.

Yet, we will still stand on Judgment Day. In fact, when that day comes, nothing terrible is going to be said about us. None of our sins are going to be repeated. Instead, Jesus will call us holy. Jesus will call us righteous. Jesus will do that because he died and paid for all those times that we failed to share the gospel and all those times we failed to be the parents and children and workers and church members God called us to be. Jesus prepared us for Judgment Day by taking all that sin away. He came to us in the gospel and gave us faith so that today, we are personally prepared to face him in peace.

Today, God wants us to have peace. It's so easy to beat ourselves up over our sins. Sometimes, I remember things I did when my children were little, and it breaks my heart that I wasn't a better parent. Sometimes, I think of members that God called me to shepherd and how little I did for them, and it makes me feel guilty. What troubles you? What memories of your own sins keep you awake at night or come to you when you least expect them? God wants you to have peace because Jesus took all those sins away. Every day that we are here, God prepares us to welcome Judgment Day, to rejoice when he appears, to stand and endure that day of his coming. He prepares by feeding our faith and reminding us of his love and forgiveness. That love and forgiveness are yours. You will stand on that day.

II.

God doesn't want Judgment Day to be scary for us, so he tells us what a joy that day will be for us. And then he uses that promise to change our lives here. God wants us to be engaged in our lives of faith here. That takes real work. But God doesn't want that work to come from terror that if we mess up, we're going to lose heaven. He doesn't even want our motivation to be losing the physical blessings he gives us here, although sometimes he does point to consequences here to help us fight back against our sinful nature. If living our faith was all about fear, then we would be slaves serving a tyrant. But we aren't slaves. We have a Father who loves us and a shepherd who died for us. God wants our life of faith here to spring from our joy. He wants it to express the peace Jesus won for us. **Peace requires preparation. God prepares us to serve him.**

Malachi called Jesus "the messenger of the covenant." The Old Testament people of Israel were waiting for God's messenger to come and bring them a new covenant, a new covenant that would be all about forgiveness. As they lived under the old law covenant, as they struggled with hardship and difficulties, many of which they created for themselves, they longed to see the messenger come and take their sins away and also put an end to all the hurts and suffering of this life. They looked forward to eternity with that messenger. So really, Malachi was talking about both of Jesus' comings at the same time. That made sense from an Old Testament perspective – both of Jesus' comings were in the future and they both had the same purpose, to save us.

For us, it's a little more complicated because we live in between those two comings. We can distinguish between Jesus coming the first time to pay for our sins, and the second time to renew this world. So instead of just looking forward, we look back to that forgiveness that Jesus won and we look forward to his return. In fact, we long for that return. Think about how much life hurts. Think about how much disappointment there is and how much of it we create for ourselves. All that hurt and disappointment only vanish when Jesus comes back.

When that day comes, Malachi says he will be like someone who refines impurities out of metal with fire or someone who bleaches filth out of garments. When Jesus comes, finally, he will cleanse God's people. Malachi says Jesus will refine the Levites – the priests and the temple workers – like gold and silver. What does he mean? The Levites here represent all God's people in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus has made us all his temple workers. We are all priests who can approach God directly. When Jesus returns, all of us will be truly purified. How often don't we struggle with sin? How often don't we try to do better but fall back into the same sins again and again – those failings as parents and children and spouses and workers and church members we talked about before? Until Jesus comes back, we can't stop sinning. God forgive us, but he only does that because Jesus paid for those sins. Even now, it's impossible for us to put all our sin aside. But when Jesus returns, we will. We will finally be free from all this sin.

Then Malachi says that God will finally have people who bring him offerings in righteousness. The Hebrew word that he uses here does not mean sacrifices. All the Old Testament bloody sacrifices were pictures of Jesus shedding his blood and dying on the cross for us. Here, Malachi speaks of another kind of offering – a gift that showed the people’s love and thankfulness. Usually it was grain or wine that was poured out on the altar. It represented all the good things that God’s people give back to their Lord. When we are made holy, we will bring God perfect offerings. You know what? They won’t be money, because I don’t think we’re going to need money when Jesus comes back. I don’t think God is going to reinstitute Old Testament sacrifices. So what will we bring? Our offerings will be our songs of praise. They will be our perfect lives of love for each other and love for God.

Sadly, we can’t bring perfect offerings now. Our sin gets in the way every time. It makes us jealous or half-hearted or egotistical about our gifts. But God still wants those gifts. God is working in our hearts and changing us and purifying us so that we strive to serve him in righteousness. Even though we can’t be perfect, those gifts do matter. They’re fruits of our faith in Jesus. And God works every day to bring more of them out of us. He refines us and purifies us. He does that, every time we hear the good news about Jesus.

Don’t we want him to do that more? Sure. But God uses those images of fire and bleach on purpose. They both hurt. I once was mowing my lawn. My mower ran out of gas, and when I went to fill it, I accidentally put my hand on the motor. It was very painful. Bleach, too, can hurt. If you spill it on your skin, you want to wash it off right away. Heaven help you if you splash it in your eyes. God uses these pictures to remind us that preparation to serve him can be painful here. When we let sin reign in our lives, God’s disciplines us to call us back to him. That can hurt. And even when it has nothing to do with the choices we make, life in a sinful world hurts. God uses every pain and sorrow to train us in how little this life matters compared to the life to come. God loves us enough to do the hard thing and prepare us for a life of serving him here and in heaven forever.

There is peace in knowing that. God loves us in Christ. It’s God’s weapon against the things that cause us anxiety. No matter how they come out – if we get the job or we don’t, if you get an A or an F, even if I forget every word of my sermon, God still does what is best for us. So be at peace. As you look forward to heaven, serve your Savior now. Not because you’re afraid of what will happen if you don’t. But because you know how much he loves you and you have peace in that love. Amen.