

The Messenger

Malachi 3:1-4

¹ See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² 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; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

There were times before the printing press, the time before most people could read, when most distant communication from a government official or religious leader came through a messenger – one who came to give news of what all citizens or residents needed to know. In some European societies this was the town crier. In Africa and Asian cultures this was the sage or storyteller who brought news for all. Today we have newspaper, radio, television and all kinds of electronic ways of getting news!

In our scripture from the book of Malachi, which means messenger – God sent His word through this minor prophet – not minor because his words were not as important as others – but because his message was relatively short – only 4 pages in our English Bible. The people who this messenger spoke to had returned from exile and desired the days of the Lord to come, bringing back the good old days of blessing and prosperity. The messenger raised many questions, brought word of God's judgment, and brought word of how God would purify the people.

Years ago one commentator heard Elie Weisel, the Jewish writer and Nobel Prize winner, recall a childhood story. When he was a boy, his mother would greet him every day when he returned from school. Every day she would ask him the same question. She did not ask, "What did you do today?" or "Whom did you talk to today?" or even "What did you learn today?" She would ask, "Did you have a good question today?"

Malachi, the messenger, had some good questions for his day. How has God loved us? (1:2) "Has not one God created us?" (2:10) "Where is the God of justice?" (2:17) How shall we return to God? (3:7) Malachi poses twenty-two questions in this short book. God's questions to the priests and the people are articulated; their responses to God were anticipated. These rhetorical questions emphasize the prophetic passion for integrity; these direct inquiries evoke the people's questions and provoke impassioned response. They were partners in critical reflection on the nature of God and self-critical reflection on the conduct of Israel.

Malachi has some good questions for our day also. "Who can endure the day of his coming?" (3:2) Paul added another question in his letter to the church at Philippi: Who will be "pure and blameless" in the day of Christ? (Phil. 1:10) The writer of Luke asked: Who will prepare the way by repentance and forgiveness? (Luke 3:1-6) These are Advent questions! Advent questions our worthiness, readiness, and willingness for Christ's coming. "The descendants of Levi" were called to new "integrity and uprightness," a turning "from iniquity," and a renewed "reverence" for God's "covenant of life and well-being" with us (Mal. 2:5-6). Like the ancient priesthood, the contemporary priesthood of believers (that's all of us) opens its life to the refining presence of God and offers its life in righteous practice.

A faithful hearing of this text will turn us to some good questions about our worship life during Advent: Are prayers prophetic as well as personal, directed to injustice and corruption as well as seasonal anxiety and individual omissions? A prayer of confession for Advent admits, "We live casual lives, ignoring your promised judgment. We accept lies as truth, exploit neighbors, abuse the earth, and refuse your justice and peace." Do our prayers address the God of mercy: "You sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation. Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins."

Do our hymns and music express the messenger's judgment as well as the joy? We are eager to sing and hear the familiar Christmas carols, while Advent hymn seem unsung and unpopular. The notes of today's text are sounded in hymns like "O Day of God, Draw Near," which sings of judgment and faithfulness, justice and security.

Our text of Malachi 3:1-3 appears in one of the signature choral works of this season, George Frideric Handel's *Messiah*. With his libretto, Charles Jennens raised Malachi's faithful question about the nature of God's love. He answered it with a catena of powerful Scriptures. A congregation blessed with the choral acumen to offer this masterpiece should hear the Malachi text in context. The recitative ("The Lord, whom ye seek shall suddenly come"), air for bass ("But who may abide the day of his coming?") and chorus ("He shall purify the sons of Levi") is answered by an alto, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us." Music can sing the Word and proclaim the good news.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, music can sing the Word, proclaim the good news, and challenge us. After the first presentation of *Messiah* in London in 1741, Handel wrote to a friend: "I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wished to make them better." The composer challenges us to go beyond feeling good to doing good. At issue are some good questions about worship in our day: Entertainment or edification? Diversion or direction? Amusement or awareness? Handel himself provided an answer. Although by 1751 he was blind, until his death he conducted *Messiah* as an annual benefit for the Foundling Hospital in London, which served mostly widows and orphans of the clergy. The intent was not just to entertain; Handel's hope was to make them just and better. His ear was open to the prophetic word: "Present offerings to the LORD in righteousness" (Mal. 3:3). **Deborah A. Block**

The messenger brought word to the people of his day. The people, newly restored in Judah, were skeptical of God's justice, because their practices of piety had yielded neither divine retributive judgment against "evildoers" (their enemies) nor prosperity for the

restoration community. Their challenges to the prophet smack of self-righteousness, and they seemingly had failed to notice that their compromised worship practices, marital infidelity, and social injustice dishonored God. They sought and desired the coming of the Lord, imagining that it will be favorable for them. The prophet, however, reminded the people that the arrival of divine judgment rarely meets human expectations—it is sudden, surprising, and often as much a judgment against the ones yearning for it as it is a judgment against their enemies (Amos 5:18). When the Day of the Lord arrives, the prophet warned, all will be found guilty and all will be deserving of punishment.

God's judgment should not, however, be understood as solely punitive, even though the people seemed to deserve punishment. God's justice was not the justice expected by the restoration community. Instead, in this text we find that the divine judgment to be exercised on the Day of the Lord will issue in a process of purification that makes a place hospitable for the abiding presence of God.

The messenger went on to explain the ways in which purifying preparations were made for God's presence with the people. First, the prophet points to the coming of a messenger who would clear or "prepare the way of the Lord" Second, the prophet describes the Lord's coming as like the refiner's fire, whose purpose is to remove impurities and strengthen the substance being refined. John Calvin wrote this about the refiner's fire: "The power of the fire, we know, is twofold: for it burns and it purifies; it burns what is corrupt; but it purifies gold and silver from their dross."

So, what is it that stands in need of purification by the refiner's fire? And what will be consumed by flames in the process? After purification, what is it that God reckons as precious metal? Calvin thought that the refiner's fire would serve to correct the corruption not only of the people, but of the Levitical priests also: "Such then was the contagion, that not only the common people became corrupt, but even the Levites themselves, who ought to have been guides to others... as it were the pattern of holiness.

The refiner's fire of purification is for the removal of impurities. When silver is refined, it is treated with carbon or charcoal, preventing the absorption of oxygen and resulting in its sheen and purity. One writer has suggested that a silversmith knows that the refining process is complete only when she observes her "own image reflected in the mirror-like surface of the metal" If this is the case, does the prophet also suggest that the image of God is restored to us in this process? Is humanity deemed good and righteous when once again the divine image is reflected in the human heart? **Jennifer Ryan Ayres**

The word of the Lord came to Malachi, the messenger, as a word of promise. That promise comes as good news to us. The messenger challenges us to ask questions about our worship and service – do we want Christ to come and bring back the good old days, when we were on top and happy; or are we willing for Christ to return to refine us into the image and reflection of God in the world?

O Day of God, draw near

Author: Robert B. Y. Scott

O Day of God, draw nigh
 In beauty and in power;
 Come with thy timeless judgment now
 To match our present hour.

Bring to our troubled minds,
 Uncertain and afraid,
 The quiet of a steadfast faith,
 Calm of a call obeyed.

Bring justice to our land,
 That all may dwell secure,
 And finely build for days to come
 Foundations that endure.

Bring to our world of strife
 Thy sovereign Word of peace,
 That war may haunt the earth no more,

And desolation cease.

O Day of God, draw nigh
As at creation's birth;
Let there be light again, and set
Thy judgments in the earth.

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