

### **Malachi 3:1-4** - “Taking the Heat for Us”

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Today is the Second Sunday of Advent and, whether you're ready or not, Christmas will soon be here. The same can be said with regard to Jesus' second coming on the final Day of Judgement. That day will also soon be here, whether you're ready or not. While our Advent services may not be helpful in getting all your Christmas shopping done or Christmas cards and letters written, they are intended to make and keep you ready for Jesus' second coming.

To do that God works through His Word, and the Word of God I'll mainly be using for this part of the service is our OT reading, from Malachi 3. As I studied the context of Malachi 3, I was struck by how similar the situation of the people of Malachi's day was to our situation today. In the verse just before our text Malachi addressed God's people with these words: *“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?’”* (2:17).

The people were basically saying by these words that it doesn't pay to be good. They had been permitted to return to Jerusalem after their Babylonian captivity, and taken part in restoring the temple, in getting back to worshipping God, and in following His will for their lives. But when, after about 12 years, they didn't notice many immediate rewards for all their reformation efforts, they began to give up on God. In, perhaps, comparing their standard of living with some of the pagans in Babylon, they began to think, what's the point. *“Where is the God of justice?”* They saw evil people prospering and good people suffering, so they began to doubt in the ways of God.

Do you ever find yourself feeling the same way at times? There are lots of times when life from our perspective makes no sense. We pray to God, we come to worship, we try to do our best to take care of ourselves and our loved ones, and yet we still suffer—we still experience times of loneliness, sickness, financial troubles, and family tragedies. It's during such times that we may begin to become impatient or doubt in God's justice. Gradually our lives can begin to turn away from God and His ways, and toward man's selfish ways of looking out only for ourselves.

So, what does God through His messenger Malachi tell His people during such times? God assured them that He would come to fulfill His promise of judgement on all sinners. But before He comes He said: *“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.”* The words *“my messenger”* in Hebrew is מַלְאָכִי (mal-a-ki). So God was saying that He would send another messenger like Malachi, the last of God's OT messengers. That NT messenger, who would prepare way of the Lord, would be John the Baptist, spoken of in today's Gospel reading.

What message was John the Baptist given to prepare the way for God to come in Jesus Christ and fulfill His promise of judgement on all sinners? The first part of God's message was the Law, through which God works to enable us to see that we are all sinners in need of a Savior from the punishment that we all deserve.

I use to think that it wasn't a hard job to convince people that they're sinners since God tells us in Romans 2:15 that He has written the Law on the hearts of us all, also know as our conscience. So, even those who don't believe in God still know some of the basics between what's right and wrong, and that they don't always do what's right. But the longer people continue in their rebellion against their conscience and God's Laws (which He makes perfectly clear in the Bible), the more determined they are to destroy even their conscience.

We are witnessing an example of the effects of man's rebellion against God's Laws in one of the latest battles taking place in the U.S. Supreme Court between those who support abortion and those who don't. An Associate Justice of the Supreme Court referred to babies in the womb as being "brain dead," which in her way of thinking gives women the right to abort such "brain dead" children in the womb. I'm wondering who is more brain dead, the baby in the womb or people who make such lamebrain statements. There is a world of difference between the developing brain of a child in the womb and the brain of an accident victim which has stopped functioning and cannot be revived.

But getting over zealous in giving promoters of abortion only God's Words of Law and condemnation doesn't ultimately help them or the children they seek to murder. That's why God, through His messengers, brings to us **spiritually**-brain-dead-sinners not only the Law but also the Gospel—the Good News that the Messiah/Christ would be coming the first time to purify us from our sins. Malachi put it this way: "*For He [referring to the LORD] will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.*"

This refining process of our Lord is different than you may think. From what I've been told, when silver is melted down in a fire in order to burn off the impurities in it, it makes a hissing noise know as "spitting." It's in this stage of refining silver that some form of carbon (like this piece of coal) is added to the melted silver. The coal evidently prevents the silver from reabsorbing the impurities in the air, which would cause it to remain in its dingy, impure state. The refiner knows when the refining process is complete when he looks at the purified silver and sees a clear reflection of himself.

This is similar to the way the Lord refines the impurities or sins out of our lives. He doesn't just stand on the sidelines and tell us to do this and don't do that, and then punish us when we disobey Him. Instead, even though we by our sins are hissing and spitting at God, He gets in the fire with us (like that piece of coal) and takes upon Himself the full heat of His judgement against our sins through His damning death. He takes our sins into the coal cellar of hell and leaves them there. Then He rises from the dead, in victory of our sins, death and the devil, to give us His perfect and eternal life.

It's through this message of the cross that our Lord shows us what sin eventually does to us, and what He has done to save us from our sins. Through this Law and Gospel He enables us to gladly repent of our sins and trust in the refining power of His death and resurrection. When this happens, what does God see when He looks at us? He see's Himself, who makes and keeps us ready to be received into paradise with Him.

While we wait for that glorious day to come God also enables us to be His "Malachi's/Messengers through our words and actions—sharing God's gifts with others, especially the gift of Jesus' death and resurrection for the eternal salvation of God's people. As we share this Good News with others for their salvation, God also works to overcome our doubts and fears, making our time in this world much more meaningful and enjoyable.

Thanks be to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Children's Sermon] Do you remember what I said Jesus was like when I talked about Jesus getting rid of all our sins or the bad things we do in our lives that separate us from God and others? Jesus is like this piece of coal.

Usually during this time of the year we think of getting coal in our Christmas stocking as a punishment for doing something bad. But when Jesus is the coal in our lives, that's a very good thing. Instead of giving us the punishment we deserve because of our sins, Jesus takes all our sins upon Himself. That's what makes Him black like coal—our sins. Then He pays for our sins through His death on a cross (taking all our sins into the coal cellar of hell), and rises from the dead to give us new and eternal life with Him in heaven. [Give them a piece of coal with a sweet surprise inside].