

Second Sunday in Advent
December 10, 2017
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Malachi 3:1-7b “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, 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 sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. 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.

5 “Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

6 “For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. 7 From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.

“Prepared with Purity”

Suddenly, without warning, they were on them—Japanese planes raining down on the American fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor. It was Sunday morning, and many of the American servicemen and women were still asleep. Within minutes, battleships were in flames. Over 2,400 American sailors would be dead. “Tora! Tora! Tora!”—the code word that complete surprise had been achieved.

It really shouldn't have been that way. Even the Japanese themselves did not intend for the attack to come without fair warning. Over the previous several months Japanese and American diplomats had been negotiating, with the goal of avoiding hostilities. But as Japanese resolve firmed for war, they hatched this plan: In the days leading up to December 7, Tokyo sent a series of encrypted messages to its embassy staff in Washington. The messages were to announce that further negotiations would be fruitless, that America had revealed its hostile attitude toward Japan, and that all hope for peace was now lost. The ambassador was to deliver the message to the U.S. secretary of state shortly before the attack. Unfortunately—for everyone—the Japanese decoding equipment broke down; the Japanese diplomats themselves did not decode the last portion of the message until after the attack was over. For lack of even an unfriendly messenger, more lives were lost. Last Thursday was the anniversary of the day of which President Franklin Roosevelt would say, “Yesterday, December 7, a date which will live in infamy.” But it was actually December 6, the day before, that was the anniversary of the day Americans needed to hear the message.

God doesn't want any single soul to be caught off guard. Malachi warns us of the coming of God in judgment. It may be a long time off. Or it may come suddenly, unexpectedly. God

wants people prepared. And so he sends his messenger. God's messenger prepares with purity.

Sometimes they spring on you all of a sudden, completely unexpectedly. Sometimes they creep up on you and still surprise you. Some news, some event completely disrupts your life and throws everything out of whack. When you feel unprepared, when you are shaken by what is going on, when an ominous sensation washes over you, you have a few options for how to deal with it. You can look for reassurance, self-assurance or assurance.

Reassurance comes when someone gives you a pat on the back or a pep talk or a big hug. At best, that other person can be a reality check on the feelings you are struggling with. At worst, it can feel like they are being dismissive of your real doubts and fears. How effective their reassurance really depends on who is trying to do the reassuring and how. So often, though, reassurance rings hollow. Nice try, but it doesn't actually change anything.

For all the surprises, for all life's sneak attacks, self-assurance sounds much more suited for what I need. Self-assurance looks inside to create my own hope. I have to do my best to prepare as best as I can to unseen threats and unknown dangers. I have to rely on my abilities and my performance. That sounds like a good plan. Other people can be unreliable. They can let you down. You have to take care of yourself. Except, what happens when the best you can do isn't good enough? What happens when one little ember driven by hurricane-force winds travels three miles and lands in your back yard? It's ok to admit you need firefighters, that you can't handle the situation with your garden hose.

Dear people of God, it's ok to admit you're not ok. It's ok to acknowledge you need help, that you can't prepare enough or ensure your own safety by all your best efforts. It's ok. In fact, it's the only way. It's the only way to find the purity necessary to be truly prepared.

This was actually one of the biggest problems the Prophet Malachi faced in delivering God's message to God's people. There is an interesting, unique literary character to this book of the Bible. Malachi records a conversation between God and his people. As God is trying to get their attention, to get them to wake up and change their behavior, they get defensive. They deny that they actually need to change. They have this certainty in themselves that they've done everything God requires.

This is the same voice inside me that hears about God's refining and tells me I'm pretty close. I have a false sense of security when I hear about the preparation from God's messenger: **"For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver."** (Malachi 3:2,3) I believe I have these pockets of goodness inside me, little nuggets of gold and silver interspersed with little flecks and fragments of dirt and dust. All I need to do is get rid of a few imperfections and I will be left only with purity.

This meshes nicely with our idea that everyone is basically good. Or at least we all start out basically neutral morally. But then we have a problem when confronted by pure evil. Some people must just be wicked. They are different. They're not like us. But the truth is much

more painful than we'd like to admit. Refining and purifying requires a much more invasive process than we can bear.

The Bible's picture of our human condition is that each person is curved in on themselves. We are turned in on ourselves. We are zeroed in on our own desires. Instead of reaching toward God and reaching out toward these people, we're in a spiritual fetal position. That fetal position might be the most logical reaction when you need protection, when you are afraid. But it just creates a greater barrier between us and God. It only increases our darkness.

Have you ever noticed how the prayer of the day, the one toward the beginning of the service, summarizes and petitions God with concise clarity? This is the prayer of the day for today: "Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world." Stirring up our hearts means disturbing the peace and tranquility we have made for ourselves with our own solutions. Stirring up our hearts means agitation. Stirring up our hearts can lead to true preparation.

Preparation. That's the work of God's messenger. God promises: "**Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.**" (Malachi 3:1) When we piece together this and other prophecies about this messenger from the other parts of Malachi, we see this messenger will immediately precede the coming of Messiah. From the words in the New Testament, we find out this messenger is John the Baptist. Today's Gospel tells us John came: "**preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**" (Luke 3:3)

Repentance means coming to grips with the reality that I'm not basically good all on my own. Repentance requires me to admit there are major impurities lurking in my heart. Even the best things I can claim for myself will melt away in the face of God's holy justice. Repentance realizes I can't look to someone else for reassurance. I can't look to myself for self-assurance. The only thing I can do is look to Jesus for ultimate assurance. When the messenger does his work, then: "**And all people will see God's salvation.**" (Luke 3:6)

Malachi gives us a glimpse of this hope: "**For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.**" (Malachi 3:6) God's changeless nature gives us assurance when our efforts aren't good enough. God's changelessness is the cure when all efforts at reassurance don't actually change our situation. God's changelessness is the solution when all my attempts to create self-assurance are so sporadic. God's changelessness lets you in on the truth that God had one solution to the darkness in this world and that's why he promised to send Messiah. God has one hope for every soul burdened with imperfection and impurity. God has one Savior who will share with the light of his own holiness. God has one ray of hope for all evil sneak attacks out there. It required his own Son to be subjected to the wickedness of unjust rulers and corrupted courtrooms, to be treated to the wicked taunts and jeers of crowds on Calvary, to do battle with the worst evil of this world and to face it all alone. The innocent sacrifice of Jesus on the cross

gives you assurance that he passed through the fires of hell to allow you to stand before your holy God without any flaw or blemish. The glorious resurrection of Jesus gives you the assurance that darkness can't conquer the light of life. Jesus shines with his purity into this world of darkness.

There is a children's bedtime prayer that voices a stark reality of the darkness we all face. If you didn't learn it as a child, maybe you heard it when Metallica used in their song "Enter Sandman." It goes like this: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." It's a little dark and somber for our modern era. But there is a quiet confidence in that prayer. We can recognize the blessing of entrusting ourselves to the care of our Lord in any and every circumstance. We can be realistic about dangers in our world, yet confident that we are prepared through Jesus Christ. In fact, there is an updated version I much prefer to the class edition of that prayer: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, His love to guard me through the night, And wake me in the morning's light."

But that confidence doesn't have to be limited to bedtime. Now I face the unknown stresses of the holiday season - the confusion of holiday parties and the chaos of mall parking lots, I pray the serenity of the changeless love of the Lord guard my heart. Now I take this semester test, I pray the Lord assure me he has passed the ultimate test to give me rest. Now I face the surgeon's knife, I pray entrusting my soul to the Lord of life. Now I enter again the halls of school on this eery day, I pray my Savior take me every step of the way. Now I face my final breath, I pray with to waiting to see my Savior's face on the other side of death.

I'm going to be honest with you. I'm feeling the darkness right now. You might be in a dark place too. It's ok to be honest. There will be darkness. But no matter what happens, you and I don't have to hunker down in the fetal position. You are wrapped up in the robe of your Savior's righteousness like a blanket. You and I have divine assurance to bring to a world in pain. You have a Savior who faced the darkest evil of humanity and came out the other side. You have a God who demands purity and then provides it through the most unspeakable tragedy of the cross. You have a Lord who knows the very real fears of death and defeated them all by his resurrection. You are prepared for whatever tries to catch you off guard. Your purity, your preparedness is found in Jesus Christ. Amen.

+ To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority now and forever. Amen. +