

Malachi 3:1-4

3 “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. ⁵ “So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty. ⁶ “I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. ⁷ Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty. (NIV84)

Prayer of the Day

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; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day

Alleluia. Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. All mankind will see God’s salvation. Alleluia. (Luke 3:4,6 cf. NIV)

Sermon Text:

Clean it up! I remember those words from my childhood. They usually accompanied a mess of my own making. A room that was completely out of control, grades that had been ignored for far too long, language that tasted as bad coming out of the mouth as it sounded in the ears of those who heard it. Clean it up was a command that came with a stern warning. If it wasn’t made right quickly, well punishment was on the horizon.

This Advent season we are using the theme “When the Lord Comes Near.” Each week supplies the rest of that thought. Last week, well when the Lord Came Near, He humbled Himself all so that He could be that Branch, righteous and perfect, who would save us from sin. This week, we focus on that final word as the messenger arrives preaching a baptism for repentance for its very forgiveness. Of course, if we are going to talk sin, well then as the Lord draws ever nearer this week, His people must be humbled.

Israel has always been an interesting study in the human condition. For 70 years, they had been in captivity in Babylon, unable to worship in the temple which lay in ruins, crying out for relief and redemption. Now back in Israel, they need to be prodded to complete the work on the temple because they have become too occupied with their own homes to pay attention to the house of God. Even then, they chase after the world around them, cast faith in the one true God aside when it doesn’t suit their needs, and are content to divide God’s people along any number of social lines, whether economic or geographic. God speaks through the mouth of Malachi, *“So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,” ... “I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you.”*

Are we in danger of becoming like Israel? More concerned with the world around us than God who made it, more concerned with the gift than the giver. Have we been more occupied with our own homes, our own lives, to pay attention to the house of God and when His truths are inconvenient, well have we tossed them aside rather than wrestle with the tough teachings they contain?

Oh, I know I'm preaching to the choir but has the choir stopped singing? Do we shake our heads in this place only to silence our voices with friends and family because sounding the clear call for repentance can make enemies? Brothers and sisters, God doesn't change, so when we see things changing in the world around us who has? Perhaps as we begin to peer into our own hearts and minds, like it or not, we begin to see the mess we have made and God, like my parents in childhood, cries, "Clean it up!"

"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.

I can still remember that feeling that came over me when I heard it. "Michael, can you come here for a minute?" Your spine kinda stiffened because you knew, you knew they had found something, the dirty room, the report card, had someone ratted you out? What did they know? The walk to wherever they were was always filled with dread. Brothers and sisters, the Lord draws near! He draws near in judgment. May He not be met with pompous pride that pretends we are worthy to meet Him. Instead, mindful of His law, His righteous and holy demands may we stand in deep humility.

But then dear fellow believers in Jesus, did you notice something in the words of our lesson? As God draws near with His fire and His soap, do you notice something there? God doesn't pass it off. Oh, He tells us to abandon the sin and return to Him but He holds onto the soap and the fire. He, and not sinful humanity, goes to work to purify the situation, the people who have made a mess of themselves and their world by wallowing in sin. Makes sense doesn't it? Only God knows the full extent of our sinfulness and depth of the stains it has caused in His creation. As He goes to work, His people will be able to stand in His presence once more, present offerings that are acceptable once again (note the privilege that bringing our offerings is presented as here).

In the fullness of time, God fulfills all of these words for Israel and for us. The Gospel introduces us to John, the messenger who prepares the people of Israel for the first appearing of our God. In love, Jesus himself will be fire and soap, refiner and launderer. Yes, He came to be our righteousness for us. His perfect life lived on our behalf fulfilled the demands of God. Ah, but that blood, that blood spilled on the cross cleans everything up for us. Washes away the stain of sin even as it burns away the dross, the impurity of my iniquity that I may stand before God purified, presentable, acceptable to Him.

Oh, and stand before Him we will, on the great and final day but not in fear of the judgment He brings. Far from it, You and I will be wrapped in the message of the messengers sent with the very Words of God Himself, heard regularly in worship and meditated upon in the quietness of our own homes, marked with the sign and seal of the very Name of God which brings blessings even as it washes away our sins in the waters of Baptism, filled with the blessings of God's own holy supper all of it far more effective than soap or fire as it gives and strengthens repentance, to a true and honest assessment of our sin that we might stand humbly before the only One who can save us through unparalleled humility of His own.

Clean it up! I remember those words from my youth and I still need them today. (Don't look too closely at my office.) Brothers and Sisters, as the Lord draws near, may He humble us with His law. May He humble us with His law that we might see our need and run to the solution. For Christ humbles to save. Amen!