

Jesus Comes, Bearing Gifts: Peace Requires Preparation!

A sermon based on Malachi 3:1-4

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Stressful situations...we've all had them. A huge semester exam coming up, a real important job interview, a conversation with a friend that's needed but long overdue...we've all been there before.

But what do you need to do to face stressful situations? Prepare, right? A student about to take an important exam, if she's prepared, if she has spent the time studying, sure, she may be a little nervous going in. If she hasn't prepared, though, she'll be what...terrified, right?

If you've prepared for your interview – polished up your resume, thought through potential questions and your answers, you'll have more peace than if you go into an interview and simply wing it.

If you've thought through what you want to say to your friend, maybe even jotted down a few notes to help guide the conversation, you can approach even the most tense conversation with a bit more confidence than if you are just planning on speaking from the heart and letting your emotions dictate what you say.

Friends, we need to be prepared for something weightier than any of that. As we'll say in the Apostles' Creed in a little bit, Christ is coming "to judge the living and the dead." And in our First Lesson, Malachi asks the chilling questions, "**Who can endure the day of his coming?**" Answer: only one who is prepared.

Now, what do you remember about Malachi? He served as a prophet about a century after the return of the exiles from their Babylonian Captivity. After the return, there had been something of a spiritual resurgence. That was now largely over. Spiritual indifference was the norm, as it had been with previous generations, including among the religious leaders. Ironically, in the prior chapters of Malachi, the people pointed to their problems and questioned the presence of the Lord. "Where is the God of justice?" they asked accusingly. Malachi's response? "Oh, don't worry, you will meet him, face-to-face. Are you sure you're ready?"

That response and our verses this morning are somewhat of a final word, because after Malachi, prophecy was cut off for centuries, until John the Baptist. Imagine that as the burning question seared in the minds of Israelites for hundreds of years...again, "You will meet your God of justice. Are you sure you're ready?"

Friends, it's been hundreds of years after Jesus ascended into heaven, when the angels promised he would return again. In the last bit of prophecy we've been given, the last chapter of Revelation, the apostle John quotes Jesus, who says, "**Behold, I am coming soon.**"

And so that question of Malachi is just as valid for you and me today. "You will meet your God of justice. Are you sure you're ready?"

Well, to prepare us, Malachi tells us God would send two messengers. First, "**I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.**" Matthew, Mark, and Luke all cite these words in reference to John the Baptist. He prepared people for the second: "**the messenger of the covenant, whom you**

desire, will come. He'll ***come to his temple.*** So, it's God himself. The word translated "messenger" in "messenger of the covenant" also means "angel" and is the word used in the common Old Testament phrase "the angel of the Lord." An "angel" who is God himself – that's the promise of the coming of Christ.

"The messenger of the covenant – Jesus - whom you desire, will come." And it's true, we want Jesus to return. We want Jesus to return. Do we really want Jesus to return right now? Is that your desire?

You see, the book of Malachi began with people questioning if God really loved them. The fact he chose them to be his special people wasn't proof enough. Ultimately, it wasn't enough for them that God would give them heaven. They wanted God to come and give them earth too: all the comfort and ease of life they believe they deserved. That's what they "desired" – the Messiah as sugar-daddy, not Messiah as Savior.

Does that sound like your "desire" as well? I mean, how many people out there, including lots of Christians, are so caught up and so focused on living their best life right now? This idea of a "prosperity gospel," that if I devote my life to Jesus and try to be the best person I can, life is always going to turn up roses. God will make everything great in my life; he will give me my heart's greatest desires.

Do you get caught in that mindset? Do you maybe going one step further, and say, "God, you owe me that." The garbage I have to go through with being a Christian, you really should throw me a bone every now and then, give me a little break and ease off the hardships here."

And when he doesn't, do that frustrate you? Do you get mad at God? Do you do what you can to avoid having to be in those positions or situations where you know your faith in Jesus is going to be put to the test or where it's going to have to be on display, and you'd rather hide in the corner, lay low, and not stand up for Jesus.

"Behold, I am coming soon," Jesus says. Yes, that word "soon" is somewhat relative, as it's been almost 2000 years since John recorded those words. But again, the signs of the End Times are here. "Soon" could be any moment.

Are you sure you're ready? Because when Jesus comes, what does he really owe you? You know, the Israelites were oblivious to the fact they were owed absolutely nothing by God. Make no mistake, the Messiah would indeed come. This is the same ***"messenger/angel of the covenant"*** who defended Israel from Pharaoh in the form of a pillar of fire. He slaughtered the Assyrians. And the wicked Israelites should have been next on that list. We sinful and wicked people should be next on that list.

Yet, when Jesus came the first time, he was not going to slaughter still stiff-necked Israel. He was going to purify them, same as he did for us.

You see, the Messiah's work here is illustrated as that of a refiner or launderer. Now, one way to understand this metaphor is in reference to how Christ, by his death, has purified us. He has burned off every impurity from our record. He has washed us of every stain.

And in that, removing our sin was a painless process for us. It hurt Christ plenty: the scourge on his back, the nails in his hands. The abandonment of the God on his soul. The punishment for billions, trillions, a number too great to count was his to carry. The pain of taking away sin was 100% on Christ.

And we praise and thank God for that. That kind of purifying, that is essential to get into heaven – that we couldn't do on our own. That's grace.

Yet, in this metaphor, remember, he's the refiner. We are the silver, the ones "taking the heat." He is the launderer. We are the dirty laundry, the ones who need to have powerful soap applied to our lives. We can't just talk about how Jesus, this "messenger of the covenant" removed our sin by his death. We also need to look at how the Messiah removes all the impurities in our life which threaten our faith in him.

Living up here in Alaska, one area I've taken a little more interest in is gold...especially mining for gold. Now, I'm no expert, mind you, especially because a lot of my knowledge is based on TV shows like Discovery's *Gold Rush*. As cool as it is to watch how after a week of mining and sluicing, they come out with the pan of thousands and thousands of tiny gold flakes, worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, but what really impresses me? The huge bars of gold...the pure gold.

You don't mine those. No, through a refining process where the gold is heated up (I saw a temp of almost 3000°F), it's melted down, a flux is added, the gold, which is heavier, sinks to the bottom, while slag (the impurities) is left at the top and removed...and once poured in a mold, you're left with a bar of 80%-90% pure gold.

Jesus purifying faith is a process. At times, it is a painful process. No matter what you say the fire and soap represent, there's pain involved. The fire and soap could refer to God's law, which drives us to a healthy pain over our sin and inability to cleanse ourselves. Any self-righteous attitudes are burnt up by the law's unattainable standards of perfection. Our pride is washed away in the law's demands. The purification process also includes the removal of things we love, but which hinder our relationship with Christ. I'm sure you could easily think of a couple of things right now. And finally, the fire and soap could be seen as the general hardships of living in a broken world.

Such things seem pointless, but in the hands of the messenger of the covenant, they work for good: weakness, forcing us to rely on his strength; sorrow, forcing us to seek a deeper consolation only Jesus can provide.

This is the type of God we have – one who allows and even brings the painful fires needed to purge our faith in him and our lives of impurities, so that we might avoid a greater, eternal fire. Our God loves us enough to prepare us to stand on the Last Day, so that we might face that day with peace, not terror.

Think of it like the parent who never disciplines their child. The parent might even think this is the result of love. "I love them too much to discipline them." And in sparing the child that smaller pain, the parent opens the child up to what? Possibly...probably a greater pain when the child grows up and is utterly unprepared for life. God loves us too much to leave us unprepared for the judgment.

But you know, God hasn't saved us from destruction just to keep us from destruction. He saves us and keeps working to purify us so we might once again fulfill the purpose for which mankind was created: to love God and live to glorify God and to be a blessing to others around us. In that way, we are part of God's universal priesthood. We who are saved will also serve the LORD, which affects the way we look at worship, and not just on Sundays, but how we have this burning desire to be in God's house, and "once in a while" won't be good enough...or "I went on Sunday, I don't really need to go on Wednesday evening" won't be our attitude anymore.

It changes our approach to God's Word, that this is what strengthens my faith in Jesus, what refines it so that I can stand firm against the assaults of temptation, sin, Satan, so Sunday School, Sunday morning Bible class, Men's Bible Class, Women's Bible Class...I don't look at it as optional anymore, but something that's a necessity for my soul.

It change the way we serve. No longer is it "well, I guess I'll do it if no one else will." Or, "I didn't help because no one asked me to." Being a priest for Jesus means we look for ways to serve. We find joy in service to others because it's service to him. This is what we were refined and laundered and purified by the blood of Jesus for.

Will it be painful? In the sense of it being self-sacrifice...taking away sometimes from what I – selfishly – would rather be doing...yes, it's painful in that. But again, this is what we were refined and laundered and purified by the blood of Jesus for. And Jesus sends ministers – called servants, like me, to remind you of this as I show your Christ. And, finally, as his priests, this is our bloodless offering...a way to simply say, "Thank you!"

You know, typically big days are only enjoyed after hard work. A Christmas party is fun, but it's preceded by hours of planning. A wedding is joyous event, but first comes months of hard work.

We sometimes erroneously view this life as "the main event." But it's not. The party comes later. Now is the time for the hard work that gets us ready for that party. We have peace now, that which the angels sang about on Christmas Eve. We know that in spite of our sins, God will never declare war on us. We are at peace in that sense. And on that last day, we will enjoy complete peace in the sense of the cessation of all that troubles us. For now, that trouble may still come. But we are at peace knowing our loving God uses that for our preparation. We are at peace, knowing we are ready for the desire of our hearts to come. Amen.