

“I Will Send My Messengers!”

A sermon based on Malachi 3:1-4

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

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" "A scientist." "A baseball player." "A princess!" But I don't think I've heard a kid say, "When I grow up, I want to be a bike messenger." Or, "When I grow up, I want to be a hotel maid." "When I grow up, I want to clean other people's clothes." It's certainly not that there's anything wrong with those jobs. They're all fine ways for a Christian to live out his or faith. It's just that they're not usually considered the most glamorous jobs.

Not usually...

As we look at Malachi's prophecy this morning, we see the job description for our coming Savior might not seem all that glamorous. He would be a messenger. He would be a refiner. He would be a launderer. Again, not glamorous, but it would show off his humility. He would humble himself to do some pretty dirty work.

And in thanks to him, so do we. We're eager to get down and dirty to become his messengers. We are bold to proclaim his Law just like Malachi and just like John the Baptist, even though it's not very fun work and isn't always appreciated. We're bold to share the Gospel and tell others of our Redeemer and his job description of making us clean.

Today, we hear about our coming Savior from the prophet Malachi, God's messenger, sent to prepare the people for the coming Messiah, our Redeemer. He reminds us that all of God's messengers come in humility. He, like John the Baptist, came in humility to prepare the way for Jesus. Jesus came in humility to be the way to heaven. And now we come in humility to share the way with others.

God's Old Testament people were waiting for the Christ to come, but while they waited they grew impatient. They complained to God that he wasn't being fair. They saw the wicked gain wealth and prosperity, while they were suffering. So they cried out against God, "Where's your sense of justice?" And God, who was always so patient with his people, finally grew sick and tired of their whining and complaining. Malachi told God's people in 2:17, "**You have wearied the Lord with your words... by saying, 'All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them' or 'Where is the God of justice?'**"

And God sent his messenger, Malachi (whose name means "My messenger" by the way) to warn them, "Be careful what you wish for... it just might come true." In fact, God was coming. But it wouldn't be like the Israelites expected. They would be on the receiving end of the judgment the God of justice would bring.

You see it was in their self-righteousness that they demanded justice from God. If they recognized how sinful they were, there's no way they would ask for justice! So God sent Malachi to point out their sinful self-centeredness. He pointed out their sin of quitting and getting a divorce as soon as their marriages were tough. He pointed out their sins of hoarding up their wealth and refusing to give it to God, or of giving God their left-over crippled and diseased animals as a sacrifice. In their sin, the last thing they

wanted was for God to come as a God of justice. If he did, Malachi warns, "***Who could endure the day of his coming?***"

And after Malachi, the last of God's prophets found in the Old Testament, there were 400 years of silence—no more prophets came until the New Testament messenger that Malachi pointed to: "***See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.***" This messenger is the messenger we read about in our Gospel lesson. All four evangelists and even Jesus himself identified John the Baptist as this messenger. And John's message wasn't much different than Malachi's: "Repent! Turn away from your self-centered sins! For the kingdom of heaven is near! And in your sins you cannot withstand the axe of God's justice!"

And dear friends, these two messengers, Malachi and John the Baptist still speak to us today! You and I aren't really all that different from the Old Testament Israelites. We too are waiting for Christ to come. And we too grow impatient. We want to know why do we have to suffer when the wicked prosper. We too often foolishly call for a God of justice. But we are sinners too, who cannot withstand the judgment on our own. We too commit sins against our spouses and fail to be as loving as we should, even if we don't get a divorce. We too withhold our offerings from God and use the blessings he's given for selfish, ungodly purposes, and we too gripe and complain against God when things don't go our way.

And so we too need to hear the warning of the law God's messengers bring to us. We need to hear Malachi warn us, "You want God to be fair?! You want justice?! Then look out!" Then, when we hear the law, when we listen to what it says, we're led to despair of our efforts to be fit for heaven, we're led to sincere sorrow and repentance over what we've done, and we are prepared for the next Messenger to come...

You know, there are really a lot of Malachi's in the Book of Malachi. First, the author, Malachi, or "My messenger," says, "***See, I will send my messenger, [the second Malachi], who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; my messenger [the third Malachi], of the covenant, whom you desire, will come...***"

This third Malachi would come suddenly, right after the second Malachi. Now even without the New Testament fulfillment of John the Baptist pointing to Jesus, we know this messenger isn't just any ordinary messenger. First Malachi says this messenger would come, not to *the* temple, but to *his* temple. This messenger he equates with the Lord of Hosts, "***the Lord [the Israelites were] seeking....***" This messenger was the messenger of the covenant. But this Messenger of the covenant didn't just come to deliver a message, but to carry it out. Jesus would be a Messenger who wouldn't just *prepare* the way, he would ***be*** the way. He would make God's covenant of grace happen. And he would purify his people.

Do you have any guests visiting you this Christmas season? If you do, I'm guessing you'll spend at least a day cleaning up around the house. Wouldn't it be embarrassing if your guests came over to find dust covering the mantle, dirty dishes filling the kitchen, and mud all over the floors? We don't want them to see things dirty, so we scrub the floors, vacuum the carpets, sanitize the bathrooms, and maybe even wash the windows!

Well, we do have a guest coming for Christmas and all year round actually. God not only comes for a visit, but makes his home, his temple, in human hearts. The apostle Paul reminded the

Corinthians, "***your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God.***" But there's one problem. God can't stand dirt. He says in Psalm 24, "***Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.***"

And that's a problem for us isn't it? Clean hands? Pure hearts? Not me. Not Malachi, not John the Baptist, not you either. All of us have sinned and on our own our hands and hearts, our very lives, are stained with sin. And like a stubborn carpet stain, no matter how hard we scrub, no matter what soap or detergent we use, we can't get rid of that sin.

But friends, when we confess that sin and repent of it, what joy is ours because God is the best house guest there is! He comes to a dirty soul ready to do his own cleaning. With a few similes Malachi describes how the Messenger of the Covenant would come.

"For he will be like a sledgehammer smashing sinners to pieces or like a deadly pestilence that spares none from death." No! That's not what he says! Though you may expect something like that because of the stain of our sin, that's not what that Messenger's like. Malachi writes, "***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.***"

Christ, the Messenger of the Covenant, is not just the blacksmith, but the refining fire. Christ is not just the launderer, but the soap. But what's the point of comparison? Well, why does a refiner put metal in the fire? To burn off the impurities which make it less than perfect, to make it totally pure silver or gold. But, maybe we're not as familiar with art of smelting. Yet, all of us... okay *most* of us are familiar with doing laundry. So perhaps Malachi's second simile is easier to understand...

Like launderer's soap that removes every stain Christ takes away every spot or blemish of sin found in us. How? Not with bleach, or detergent, or soap, but with blood. And not just any blood—his blood. John writes, "***the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin.***" Now you and I are perfect, pure, spotless, without wrinkle or blemish or stain, fresh from the Cleaner's! Now you and I can be certain that we "***can endure the day of his coming***" We "***can stand when he appears***" because this Messenger of God—the Messenger of the Covenant, has made us pure. He has become the way to heaven.

What comfort God's people have! Though we deserve to be destroyed for our sin, instead we're cleansed of it! God makes us perfect and clean, meeting his holy standards, so that he can come and make our hearts his temple! How do God's people respond to such grace? Malachi tells us...

He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

God would purify the Levites—that is, the priests—and they would bring acceptable offerings once more. Now the Hebrew word used for "offerings" here isn't the word used for animal sacrifices. Those were animal offered to make atonement for sin. But this word is for the grain offering that accompanied the bloody sacrifices. It didn't pay for sins, but expressed trust in God's promises and thanksgiving for the forgiveness given.

And this is the only real response for one who's been washed clean of their sins by the blood of Jesus! We can't help but give our thank offerings to him. Faith in the purification won by the Messenger of the Covenant—this alone saves. But this faith is never alone. For where a heart is filled with trust in God's grace, where the Holy Spirit makes his temple, there is a heart filled with an overwhelming desire to thank Jesus and offer our best him—even our very lives.

But is our best, is our life, ever good enough? Can we ever adequately thank him? Here we again trust in the purification our Savior brings. The complaints given when offering our time and talents to our Savior, thinking, "I have better things to do than this," the selfish attitudes that frown as our clenched fists slowly release our offerings to the plate, the stain of these sins are removed in Christ. Like the Levites, we're purified and refined so that when God looks at us he sees only perfect offerings—acceptable, sweet and pleasing to him.

We give our treasures to God with thankful hearts, giving him all of our money and possession—not all to church, but *all* to the glory of God. And we offer our time gladly, using our gifts and talents to serve him.

And as a part of that service we all serve, in a certain sense, as pastors and priests. Peter writes, "***You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.***" What's one of the best ways you can express your thanks to God? Declare his praises to others!

Then you will become a Malachi—one of God's messengers. You like Malachi, like John the Baptist can share the law to point out the stain of our sin that dare not ask for God's justice. Then they will be prepared for you to tell them about the Messenger of the Covenant, Jesus, who has purified *their* hearts to make his dwelling with *them*. Then, they too will bring acceptable offerings to God in thanks to him.

Dear friends, may we all continue to make such offerings in righteousness, thanking Jesus for purifying us and making us ready for Christ's coming even if it happens today; ready because he's cleaned our hearts and made them his home. Let's keep thanking him in all we do until he makes his heaven our home. Amen.