

Malachi 4:4–6 (Luke 1:5–25)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 December 2018

Preacher: David Helm

[0 : 00] There are certain Sundays where you feel, in the presence of God's people, the sensitivity of His Spirit, even as we are led in music and in prayers, and you arrive not having fully known, but come to understand soon.

That the Lord is in His place, and He has business to do with us. He has hearts to soften among us, wills to correct, and a word to speak.

I very much feel that way this morning. Between Malachi, his six messages, and the celebration of the season of Advent, in other words, between the first reading today and the second, stand 400 years.

400 years of divine silence, of the thundering voice of heaven, fallen itself, mute.

400 years for a discouraged church to wrestle with the words of Malachi.

[2 : 00] 400 years for a disappointed people to come to terms with the activity of God in their own life.

If I was to summarize the aim of Malachi in two lines, it is this prophetic plea that when you don't see God, when you don't hear from God, when you wonder about the love of God, you are to retain your faith, nevertheless, in the promises of God, and you are to remain faithful in the pathways, the pathways that He has set down.

We've been six weeks, seven weeks, preparing for Advent, and the first week of Advent is now here, and we are wondering over these weeks together, how will we be prepared?

And Malachi closes with the word, remember, that law, and behold, I will send one to fulfill my word. In other words, all that we have done over seven weeks is asking us, in anticipation of Advent, especially when the circumstances of life have disappointed you, discouraged you, brought disillusionment concerning God within you, to retain faith, somehow, in His promises, and to walk faithfully in His paths, to put it as simply as I can, to put Malachi's top shelf preaching at bottom drawer level, trust in His word, be true, to His ways, remember, the covenant, the Old Testament closes with, in a sense, I know you don't see me, and by the way, it's going to be a while before you hear from me, but believe me,

[4 : 48] I'm coming, I'm coming, when the gospel opens, there is evidence that it wasn't merely a few or some in Malachi's day who gave it a good run, who said, I'm going to trust, though the earth give way, I'm going to walk as truthfully as I can, though there's no prophet along the way, that, that even beyond Malachi's day, when you arrive at the gospels, there are some, that are still working out, his sermon series, the church, before the church, of the New Testament, consisted at least, of three senior citizens, four,

Zachariah and Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna, and there was one person in the youth group, Mary, three old people, trying to adhere to the word of Malachi, and one vibrant, fresh new faith, willing to secure our salvation.

I want to look at the character of Zachariah and free him from our unwarranted caricature of his life. Indeed, free Luke from the way we think he should do Christmas in hopes of encouraging your heart on a day when you don't know if you should trust his word or remain true to his ways.

Here he is, Luke 1, 5 through 7. I call it the country parson and his wife.

[7 : 16] And here is one who is faithfully applying the message of Malachi in three ways.

He's walking out his calling. Verse 7. He embodies Malachi's character.

Verse 5 is his calling. Verse 6 is his character. And verse 7, he certainly exemplifies all of the congregation's challenges.

verses. Verse 5, his calling. In the days of Herod, king of Judah, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah, and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name

was Elizabeth.

He's a priest. Well, that ought to free us from Luke's, our caricature of Luke's Christmas, who thinks that Christmas begins when an angel appears over a virgin in a field near Bethlehem.

[8 : 23] No, when God's word returns, it's going to return to a priest in the temple where you would expect it to occur if God was clear on the fulfillment of his words.

He was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah, and he had a daughter, a wife, from the daughters of Aaron. Aaron, of course, was the fountainhead of the priesthood.

Her name was Elizabeth. When Mary will meet this couple, it says in verse 39 that she will need to go to the hill country.

The hill country in the Old Testament word from Joshua 21, when it divided the priests among the people, is associated with the town of Hebron, about 19 miles south of Jerusalem.

So there were priests put in the town of Hebron, which is an interesting place to be situated by way of pastoral calling. Hebron, not Bethlehem, was the place where God appeared to Abraham and said, look up in the night sky, I'm going to do something in the world.

[9 : 43] Hebron was the place where Abraham bought land that his wife would be buried and he himself would go into the ground. And Isaac after him and Jacob, the patriarchs, are on the stone bed of promise, believing in his words.

Hebron is the place that David went to in order for his reign to come forth. Why? Because Hebron was the place of Abrahamic promise and Davidic fulfillment.

And here is this priest named Zechariah, I believe, carrying out his pastoral ministry in the town of Hebron. Not simply through the illusion that he dwelt in the hill country and the hill country of the Old Testament was associated with Hebron, but in the book of Numbers, chapter 3, those priests in Hebron were given guard duty quote, over the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the vessels, and the screen.

The very thing that Zechariah is responsible for when he goes to Jerusalem. He's fulfilling his ministry within the very altar and the temple. So here it is.

400 years later, a man nearing retirement is fulfilling his pastoral calling in a tucked away but historically significant place paying attention to the commands and the duties of Moses.

[11 : 29] He is a faithful man by way of calling. He is faithful by way of character. Look at verse 6. And they were both righteous before God walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

When you look at the Greek translation of Malachi and it calls on the very end to remember the rules and the statutes and the commands of Moses, what you see in Zechariah is a full-fledged identification with that remembrance.

Here is a man who was righteous walking blamelessly literally in a sense he was justified and living justly.

He was believing in the promises and walking in the ways. In other words, he was a reader of the word. He was a doer of the word.

He was an exemplar of the word. He was a believer. Beautifully. Living his life out in anonymity.

[12 : 31] Even though no one could see him and no one knew him. And here is the key. It was in the midst of challenges that he fulfilled God's word.

Look at verse 7. But they had no child because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years. By way of calling, he was faithful.

By way of character, he was living in fidelity. By way of expectation of what God would do for him, he was living unfruitfully.

There was no fruit. He was barren. His wife embodied the very congregation of Malachi's day.

Where are you, Lord? How have you loved us?

Why do the evil prosper? When will you come to us? And in the midst of the personal crises of life, the circumstances that would make you or me wonder if God is with us.

[13 : 34] That's his condition. There was no hint that God spoke to him.

There was no pulling back of the veil that God was with him. He'd been faithful to God without the fruit of the womb which in his day in particular would have signified the blessing of God.

What a man. What an exemplar for you and for me. His faithful ministry in 5-7 give way to a fantastically unfortunate day.

Verses 8 and a bit. This man was honored before men in the most humbling of ways.

It says that while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty. In other words, he had left Hebron, walked in Jerusalem, was fulfilling his priestly duty according to the custom of the priesthood.

[14:59] At that time he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. Now this is significant because the temple and the altar of incense is just outside the Holy of Holies and there was a moment then where this division of priests which were responsible for the incense and the altars one day a year one among them would be chosen to take the coals that were firing the incense just beyond the veil and to take the coals and to go into the Holy of Holies for the atonement of the people that in the midst of the mercy seat the blood would be there and the prayers of the people would rise asking for atonement and he was selected.

I mean this is better than any retirement watch they would ever give you. He was an honorable man living honorably and was finally honored.

What a humbling thing but all of that honor in verses 8 to 10 it actually escalates to being incredibly favored.

I mean if it wasn't fortuitous enough to be the man that went into the Holy of Holies he was favored before God in the most unspeakable of ways.

Look at verses 10 or 11 and following through 17 the announcement. While he's there praying the people are praying there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense and Zechariah was troubled when he saw him and fear fell upon him but the angel said to him do not be afraid Zechariah for your prayer has been heard and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you shall call his name John and you will have joy and gladness.

[17:05] something his life had lacked for many decades. You'll have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth for he will be great before the Lord and he must not drink wine or strong drink and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

In other words he's going to fulfill the final words of Malachi. He will go before him in the spirit of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, the disobedient wisdom to the just to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

The appearance of an angel, the announcement by the angel, the fulfillment of Malachi's prophetic vision. God is speaking in the temple to a godly man and saying this is the moment and through your wife.

Behold, I'm here to prepare my people for what they will one day call Christmas.

Faithful ministry, fantastically favored by God, was this man who in the face of life, held on to his faith and walked in fidelity.

[18:41] And yet even he, even he was unprepared. This is the unfortunate part of the day.

It's unfortunately for us, the only thing we remember about him. Zachariah said to the angel, how shall I know this from an old man? My wife has advanced in years.

I think what he was really saying is this is impossible. Not only am I near retirement, she's physically beyond the years of being able to give birth. How's that going to happen?

And the angel, with all due angelic bravado, says, hey dude, no he doesn't, he says, I'm Gabriel.

Almost like, you have any idea who was in front of you, man? I ran messages to Daniel. How's this going to happen? I'm Gabriel.

[19:47] He doesn't say, I'm God, or God's going to do this. He says, how's this going to happen? I'm Gabriel. I am the messenger.

I stand in the presence of God. In other words, he is so unfamiliar with the human unpreparedness to continue to believe all things in regard to the word, because he himself stands in the presence of God.

And behold, he says, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their time.

If I had to capture the fullness of this message today by way of encouragement, it would actually be the final lines of that verse, my words which will be fulfilled in their time. My words which will be fulfilled in their time.

In their time, my words will be fulfilled. And he falls mute. How unfortunate.

[20:57] The one blemish on his pastoral record came in a fleeting moment where he let go of that faith and by implication didn't receive it in fidelity and he went mute.

But let's not hang him on it. He's actually, in Luke's way, articulating the reality for all of us. None of us. None of us who even are giving Malachi the best run of our lives possible.

To everything you're looking at, which is destroying your life, or you're wondering if there's any hope, if you even adopt Malachi's message and you give it as good a run as possible, you're going to be no better than Zechariah at the end of the day.

And he's emblematic of the people of God. He falls mute, just as the disciples at the end of Luke go blind. So the whole gospel is enconced by these lights on the wall that indicate we are all like the people of Isaiah's prophetic discourse, that we are walking in darkness, a light is coming, and yet we are by nature mute and blind and in need of something that even we can't do.

And so here he is, this beautiful, spiritually handsome, elegant couple, nearing the close of their ministry, in need of God to do something that all their faith and all their fidelity and all their perseverance, all their labor, all the well-meaning of their heart can't quite get done.

[23 : 03] my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.

So his faithful ministry, his fantastically unfortunate day, must give way to God overcoming his human frailty.

frailty. That's it. Christmas is about God overcoming human frailty. Get this, not merely through the birth of Jesus, one birth, but of necessity, the birth of John.

Advent requires two births, John and Jesus. Because John will indicate to you the fulfillment of Malachi's message to say if you want to be ready, you've got to listen to John's preaching, which is simply this.

Repent. Or don't lose your faith in his word. Or return to some sense of fidelity to his ways.

[24 : 30] Or trust and walk in truth. Because the great one is coming. The one that you need mercy from.

The one who can fulfill what your faith can't do. The consequences of this many months of silence must have been devastating for this man.

But evidently his lack of belief was only momentary because it's evident that he goes home, he scribbles out something to his wife, and this beautiful woman receives his scribbblings that she is going to have a baby, and she believes.

And you know she believes because she willingly in her aged state enters into physical union again with her old husband to bear a child by faith.

So she receives the word. In other words, she's the embodiment of those who feared the Lord in Malachi's day. She had faith in the promises and she was going to live in fidelity.

[26 : 01] How do I close this for you? You and I need an everyday readiness.

to receive God's word. Zacharias stands not so much as a warning to us, but an example for us of proper preparation.

The word of the Lord is fulfilled by the Lord, not by us who lament and long for it to be so.

In other words, you want to be ready for Christmas? Trust that God will meet you, speak to you, encourage you, love you, remain faithful to you, be with you, fulfill things in you, create steadfastness for you.

God, in Christ, your life, your life, in end, thankfully, to all our lament.

[27 : 45] Our Heavenly Father, we come now to the table because we need Jesus to do everything we're trying to do, but can't get done.

We need Jesus to fulfill your word. We need Jesus to bring us into your presence. We need Jesus. We need even all that Zechariah has said about our prior need. Behold, his name is John, our Lord. We say happy Advent because we have listened to the voice of John.

And we prepare our hearts for Jesus by repenting of our lack of trust in your word and our lack of fidelity to your ways.

[29 : 04] Meet us come Christmas. Meet us in this meal. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.