

The Promise of God: The Coming of the Lord

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Date: 10 December 2000

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[0 : 00] Welcome to another Sermon on the Web from St. John's Shaughnessy Anglican Church in Vancouver, Canada.

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The following message is from the December 10, 2000 service at St. John's Shaughnessy. The Reverend Dan Gifford delivered his message from the book of Malachi, the third chapter, verses 1 to 4.

The title of the message is The Promise of God, The Coming of the Lord. I invite you to turn to Malachi 3, verses 1 through 4, and we'll be going through this.

And as you're turning there, I just want to say that I have a new appreciation for David doing marathon sessions for the past three months. I got up at 6 or 6.30 today to go to the 7.30 to preach, and this is my third time around, and I think I might just about get it this time.

[1 : 29] As I was driving to church, it was the coldest night, I think, of the year so far. It was just black and cold and dark, and the only good thing I could think about as I was coming in is at least this means that I'm not living in Florida.

And as you know, they're having trouble counting down there, and they're having trouble finding out who's going to be president.

And I have a real temptation when I go back to Minneapolis after Christmas to see friends and some relatives to tell them, look, if you don't choose soon, you know, you lose your independence, and you're going to have a queen rather than a president.

And that would be rubbing it in, but Gore and Bush are having a tough time because they're going through a roller coaster ride. They are making claims to all kinds of powerful courts, and these courts are giving different answers to their calls for justice.

And it's very interesting that they say that they both say, I simply want justice. But what they both mean by justice is another story.

[2 : 37] It means the right conditions for winning the presidency. And so when the court decides against them, there are great complaints of injustice. And, you know, the people in the time of Malachi appealed to God for justice as well.

And by justice, they meant the conditions that they really desired in order to make life good for them. And right now, in this time when this is written, the people of God felt that God was not doing enough for them.

He was being unjust. They'd come off a terrible time of exile and homelessness, and they expected that after the temple was rebuilt, there would be good times again. Yet, instead, the promised land is very desert-like.

It's not a paradise. They were still subject to Persian rule. They were subjugated. And finally, religious activities were burdensome, actually.

And the people's relationships between one another and the priests were not good. And so there's this great complaint, if you look at verse 17, which starts out just before chapter 3, that says to God, everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.

[3 : 48] Or by asking, where is the God of justice? He is unjust. And I think that this happens in our own lives, this kind of complaint. We, from time to time, wonder, why is God not acting fast enough?

It seems that those who don't follow Jesus are doing better than we are. They're happier and more fulfilled, even. Or those who have mistreated us are doing quite well.

Or we wonder why our family members aren't coming to know God and to follow Jesus, even though we've been praying for them for a long time. Or we don't see God doing something about our loneliness or our depression.

And I think that there are two ways to come to God about his seeming slowness to act in our favor. One way is to accuse God in the arrogant way that we see in verse 17 here, complaining that God delights in evil.

He's not really present. But the other way is just, and it is the right way. And it is a way of fearing God, actually. And it doesn't mean fear in the worldly sense of being pushed away from somebody because they scare us.

[4 : 56] But it's a fear in the sense of recognizing God's authority over us and that situation that we find ourselves in, in the world around us. This fear actually draws us towards God because it involves knowing that our well-being is completely, totally dependent upon him.

And he is the only one to trust and obey. And what I'd like to do is briefly look at a psalm, Psalm 73, because it shows what it means to fear God in a hard time.

It's on page 514. Keep your finger in Malachi 3 there and just turn left. And go to page 514. We'll look at verse 21. This is a marvelous expression of fearing God.

It's a prayer to God. Verse 21, Psalm 73. And he says this. It's a very honest prayer. When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in the heart, I was stupid and ignorant.

I was like a beast towards thee. Nevertheless, I am continually with thee. Thou dost hold my right hand. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel. And afterward, thou wilt receive me to glory.

[6 : 10] Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart may fail. But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

You see what's happening here is this person who's praying is questioning God. He's admitting his feelings of forsakenness. And that he actually tends towards turning against God.

That's why he says, I was like a beast towards thee. But through this hard time, there is a fear of God. He says, who have I in heaven but thee? And part of that fear is a deep trust that pulls him into God.

Nevertheless, in other words, despite hard things around me, I am continually with thee. Thou dost hold my right hand. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel.

And further on, he says, there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee. You know, this is an expression of the godly way to respond to things in our lives and around us that make us wonder whether God really is in control.

[7 : 20] But the problem is here that is that Malachi is speaking to a people that wants God to act now. They don't fear God. They don't see evidence of God's power and authority.

They want him to step in and make things right. They see him as their servant. And so if you turn back to Malachi 3, you see here God's word coming to this kind of people who really don't fear God.

And God says, yes, I am coming. It's verses 1 and 2. The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. And you must understand that this would be good news for the people of Israel.

God is coming into their lives, they're thinking. And things will get better because of that. And I think that the thought is something that we cherish from time to time as well.

We feel the same way that the Israelites do, that God will step in and he will make this hard situation suddenly disappear. This is our great hope. This is our definition of justice.

[8 : 21] However, verse 2 comes along and it begins with an ominous but. It says, but who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appear?

Here he appears. Well, here is a God presented that is not tame. He's not Israel's servant. Instead, he is awesome and powerful and people can't stand in his presence.

It's a bit ominous. But the people might have thought, well, that's okay because maybe it's our enemies who will be frightened of this God. But the prophecy takes a further turn. It says that he is like a refiner's fire and like a fuller's soap.

In other words, he's like a person who makes precious metal with a hot fire that burns away impurities and reveals a pure metal. And he's also like the soap that was used in washing clothes at that time.

It's like a strong lie that lifts out stains. And this must have been curious to Malachi's listeners. Why would God say that he is one who tests with fire and cleanses with strong soap?

[9 : 25] How is that going to help us? They may have wondered how this would deal with those problems around them. Well, the final shock as this prophecy turns is in the middle of verse 3.

And it says this, he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. And this is shocking because what is happening here is God, in a sense, is pointing his finger at the people of Israel.

He's saying that he is going to purify the priests of Israel who represent the people of God and are supposed to be holy. They're the ones to present sacrifices to God. They're the ones to lead praises of God.

And if they need to be purified and cleansed, then the whole nation certainly needs this work done in their lives as well. And so God is directing a powerful work at each of them.

That's what happens when God comes, he says. And so this message of Malachi is saying God's not going to do a great work of justice by getting rid of your outside problems. He's going to do it by doing an inward work.

[10 : 30] He's going to change your hearts, the people of God. They will be cleansed by God and purified because God comes. And you can probably imagine this might have been very uncomfortable for those who were listening because the coming of God is not about the ending of threats.

It's about a change that is going to happen inside. It's going to be about ungodly attitudes and activity being burned away and lifted away. And it will be about a strengthening of the fear and trust in God.

And I think that this prophecy speaks to each of us as well because God is near to you and me in Jesus Christ. And God is not so much about changing the hard circumstances we find ourselves in as he is about cleansing us and refining us on the inside.

And he does this patiently and purposefully. That's what it means where he sits to refine that gold and silver. And I think in my life I've seen that, that the very hardest things that I have gone through, they have never been immediately sort of taken away by God and dealt with.

But they are always used by God to purify my faith or for me to turn to God in forgiveness and repentance. They were always used as a way for God to change my heart and my mind and to deepen my faith.

[11 : 55] And it's important for us in this Advent season to see that in Jesus again, God has come into our lives. And the result of his coming is that he is working in your hearts and in your minds.

His coming always means change. And that's why John, in preparing the way for Jesus, said that Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. In other words, God's presence in your life and with fire. And he's saying that because Jesus is present in your life by his Holy Spirit, there will necessarily be a fire that involves purifying and cleansing. That's the work that a holy God does for his people. And our response is called for, if you look down at verse 7, it says that the way we cooperate with this powerful work of cleansing and purifying is to repent.

At the end of verse 7, it says there, return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. It's really a call to throw off those things that are not of God and to deepen their trust in God by living for him, allowing God to purify your motives and your action.

[13 : 06] And I see this as a chance for me to make a small apology for mistakes in leading the services over the past few weeks. For various reasons, apparently I've been forgetful of late.

I think it has to do with a blessed event that is coming up. And some of you may have noticed that I, at the beginning of the service, skipped the confession and jumped right to the absolution to start out with.

And I thought I caught myself in time, but everybody noticed. And I was kind of worried about what people would think. And fortunately, David alleviated all that. He said, no, everybody would have understood very well.

And I thought, what does he mean? He said, oh, they would have just smiled and thought, uh-oh, he's having another Catherine moment. And I do thank you for understanding that. But it is an omission that I think the people of Israel in this passage were making.

They were skipping the idea of confession, which is really cooperating with the purifying process. It involves repentance. You know that we are made positionally clean through Jesus' death.

[14 : 08] That's what absolution is about. But we must remember that Jesus' power works in our lives so that he is in the process of making us clean and pure in practical ways, in very real,

down-to-earth ways that demand our cooperation.

This is the repentance that God called Israel to, but he also calls us to because God is in our life through Jesus. And I want you to look at the practical ways in verses 5 and 6.

This is an interesting little section because it talks about people that God is witnessing against. And there are people that we think, oh, aren't they awful? I'm not like that. But the people that God is witnessing against actually calls us to ask questions of repentance of ourselves.

And so in verse 5 it says, I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers. And the question that comes up for us because of that is, do we have other gods? Do we seek power?

Do we seek things that we want through other gods, whether it's wealth or status or reputation? And then a second question is, God is swiftly witnessing against adulterers.

[15:18] And the question that comes to us of repentance is, how faithful are we? How faithful are we to those around us? And is our sexual life godly?

And is it pure? Question of repentance. Then he says, I witness against those who swear falsely.

And our question is, how truthful are we at home and at work?

What is our integrity like as we go about our profession? And then there is witness against those who oppress the hireling and those who are vulnerable. Well, how do we treat those we have power over?

Whether it is our children or those who work for us or those who are perhaps in a lower status. How do we relate to them? And then here again, there is a witness against those who thrust aside the sojourner.

That's a foreigner. And the question that comes to us of repentance is, how good are we at welcoming others in our lives for the sake of Jesus Christ? How good are we at giving them the message of Jesus, which tells them how to come home?

[16:22] How is the hospitality in our life, which is so important in Scripture? And then the final practical question of repentance is verses 8 through 12.

It's a big section. It's a question about how money is spent. Is the priority on God's work? It's the question of repentance. The thing that gives us most security, the thing we depend on most often, is money.

How is it that that relates to our priority of God? These are very practical areas in our lives that God is likely in the process of making clean and making pure.

And as we close with this passage, in this passage, there is the goal of all of this purifying work at the end of verse 3 and verse 4.

And it says this. He says, He will refine them like gold and silver till they present right offerings to the Lord. And then the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old, as in former years.

[17:30] And you see what the goal is. It is so that the offering, not only of the priests, but of Judah and Jerusalem, which is the whole people of God, will be pleasing to the Lord. In other words, all of this is happening so that they will be truly worshipping God with their lives.

And this is a call to us because the nearness of God means that He will constantly purify us and change us in order for us to present a pleasing offering to Him.

That's not always comfortable. But God's mission in our lives, the purpose He's carrying out, is to make us into pure worshippers. He works to form us into people that give our lives to God in every aspect of our life, especially our work and our family and our social life.

That's what it means to fear the Lord and it's the source of real blessing. It's what it means to really worship God Monday through Saturday as well as Sunday. It is the offering of our lives to God that real blessing comes because right relationships, not only with God, but with all those around us, will grow and become exciting as a result.

But interestingly, and I found this, it is also through this offering that the hard things that God seemed very slow to act on actually lose their power over us.

[18:53] And I think this blessing of this kind of worship, the worship that comes from being cleansed and purified, is perfectly described in God's words at the end of Malachi. And he says it in, actually, chapter 4, verse 3.

He says, after, he says for, oh sorry, verse 2 at the end. He said, but for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings, a healing of a relationship with God and with one another.

You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall. It is an expression of God's powerful work, the blessings that come from true worship of the living God.

And I'd like to end this sermon with a prayer. It's a prayer we often say at communion to start it out. And it's a collect for purity. And it is a prayer that God will do in your life what this passage says God will do.

So I invite you to turn to page 67 in this small maroon colored book, the Book of Common Prayer. Page 67. And I'd like to say this prayer together.

[20 : 03] And you don't have to say it because it is a dangerous prayer. It is a prayer to ask God to change you for his presence to purify and cleanse and for us to cooperate with that.

So if you would like, read it with me. Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be opened, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify thy holy name.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen. This MP3 sermon along with many others is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohnschaughnessy.org.

That address is www.stjohns.org.

On the website, you will also find information about ministries, worship services, and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy. We hope that this sermon on the web has helped you and that you will share it with others.

[21 : 27] Thank you. Thank you.