

December 5, 2021 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

The Messenger is Coming!

He will confront us

He will cleanse us

“The Messenger” is the name of our weekly newsletter. I’m not sure when that got started. Maybe some of the “old time” members can enlighten me. I’m guessing that somebody like the alliteration of St. Matthew Messenger with the repeating “M.” Here, in Malachi 3:1, two messengers are mentioned. In the verses just before this section, some people were complaining that God was unfair. They asked (2:17), “**Where is the God of justice?**” They were disappointed that they were experiencing tough times. They thought that life was unfair. They thought that either God does not care or he’s not there. Even today, Bible critics ask, “Where is the God of justice? You Christians say that God is a God of love, but I see a lot of injustice in the world. Life is not fair or easy. And all this talk about the world ending and standing before this God of judgment? I don’t see it. I don’t believe it.” “**Where is the God of justice?**” In response to them and as an encouragement to us, the Lord almighty, who is still in control of everything in this world, speaks through his prophet Malachi. He lets us know that Jesus – the Messenger of God’s covenant, his contractual commitment to us – is coming. He will confront us, but he will also cleanse us.

He begins (:1), “**I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.**” This first “messenger” is John the Baptist whom we heard in this morning’s gospel lesson. He prepared the people’s hearts for the coming of the Savior. He warned the people that they were sinful and doomed to death. He led them to see that they needed a Savior. And once John the Baptizer did his work (continuing in Malachi 3:1), “**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.**” Jesus is the second messenger who is still coming.

Malachi asks in verse 2, “**But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?**” In verse 5, the Lord essentially says, “You want a God of justice? OK. I will put you on trial. I will point out all of your sins to you. I will point out that you do not give me first place in your hearts and lives. I will point out that you are as guilty as sin.”

Who of us can stand before the Lord? God is holy and we are not. Before a surgery, the doctors, nurses and entire surgical team do all they can to eliminate germs. They scrub with special soap. The patient also has to wash with special soap and then wipe himself down with disinfectant wipes. If someone just came from cleaning out the barnyard, they would not allow him into the operating room, of course. He would be covered with mud and muck. And we can not stand in the presence of a holy God either. We are dirty with our sins. It would be silly even for someone who was wearing his normal street clothes to argue that he should be able to enter the operating room because he was not as dirty as the guy who just cleaned out the barnyard. They would not let him into the operating room either. And it is silly for us to argue that we are not as sinful as someone else. God does not grade people as pretty good sinners and really bad sinners. He only has two groups – perfect people and sinners. And you know what group we are in.

Through his Word, the Lord confronts us with this truth. We need to hear that we are sinful. If we do not regularly hear and acknowledge that we are dirty, guilty sinners, we will start comparing ourselves to others that we hear about on the news. We will start thinking that their sins are much worse than our sins. We will start making excuses for our sinfulness. “It’s not my fault. My parents did not raise me right. My children made me lose my temper. My parents are too strict. My co-workers and classmates get away with much more.” And on and on. We can not escape. The Lord confronts with the truth that we are sinners who deserve to be separated from God and his blessings for all eternity.

We do not like being confronted with our sins. We do not like the idea of changing our lives and giving up our pet sins. Like an alcoholic likes alcohol, sinners like sin. Our sinful nature wants to keep on sinning, the very thing that is condemning us to damnation.

If you had cancer, would you want your doctor to tell you? What if your doctor did not want to get you upset, so he decided not to tell you about the cancer? Would you like that? Because he is concerned for you, your doctor will share the test results with you and tell you that you have cancer. That way you can being treatments and live. Because Jesus, the Messenger of the Covenant, cares for you, he shows you in his Word that you are not perfect. But his goal is not just to make you feel bad. His goal is for you to turn to him for treatment.

Yes, Jesus confronts us with our sin – and we do not like that – but he also cleanses us. Malachi explains (:2,3), **“For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.”** Cleansing us from our sins is not a simple process. Jesus can not just flip a switch or blink his eyes and make us pure. The dirt of our sins needs to be removed. Malachi says that Jesus will be like a refiner’s fire. If a silversmith has some dirty, or impure, silver, he will not be able to make quality silverware. He has to get rid of the dirt. That is a long, slow process. He has to heat the silver until it is a liquid, but not too hot that it bubbles or boils. Once the silver is a liquid, the dirt will either burn off or float to the surface. Then the silversmith has to carefully scrape the impurities off of the molten silver. Then, when the silver is cooled, it is stronger and purer.

Malachi also says that Jesus will be like a launderer’s soap. When we wash our clothes today, it’s a pretty simple process. We put our dirty clothes in the washing machine, add some soap, put a button and walk away. Back in the day, it was not so easy. The launderer had to go to the river or lake. He had to rub the clothes with soap, soap that would have a bit of lye, or acid, in it. It burned the hands. Then he had to scrub the clothes against a washboard to work the dirt loose. It was hard work and it hurt the hands.

It was hard work for Jesus to get rid of the dirt of our sins. It hurt his hands terribly as he hung on the cross suspended by nails that were pounded through his hands. As he hung on the cross, he was paying the price for our sins. He was taking the dirt of our sins away. To purify the silver, the silversmith has to make the silver pass through the flames. Jesus passed through the flames as he was on the cross. He experienced the reality of hell – separation from God. Through his death, though, all of your sins have been burned away. Your guilt is gone. Your sins are forgiven. You are cleansed. You do not need to fear standing in God’s court. You can stand before God himself, chin up, with no shame or regrets at all.

Malachi explained (:3b,4), **“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.”** In the Old Testament times, only the priests, descendants of Aaron of the tribe of Levi, could offer sacrifices at the temple. Before the priest could offer sacrifices, he had to

go through a little ceremony where he, himself, was purified. Once his sins were forgiven, then he could approach the Lord to offer sacrifices. Now that we live in the era of the New Testament, the Bible says that every believer is a priest. You can all approach the Lord directly. We do not need to work through priests or pray to saints in heaven. (In fact, the Bible says that we should NOT do those things.) We can talk to God himself in prayer. We can stand before God because he has cleansed us. We can offer him gifts to show him how much we appreciate him. We can work faithfully and show love to others as a reflection of his love for us. And the Lord is pleased with such good efforts done in faith.

In verse 6, God adds, **“I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.”** Because God’s nature does not change, his gospel promises do not change. Even though Israel had been unfaithful, the LORD would remain faithful to his promises. Even though we have been unfaithful, the Lord will remain faithful to his promises to you. He will not leave you or forsake you. He will not turn away from the broken and contrite heart that is sad because of its sins. He will forgive and forget your sins. His mercies will be new every morning. He will guard you in all your ways. He will hear and answer your prayers. He will welcome you home to heaven where all sin and sorrow will cease.

During this Advent season, we do not just focus on Jesus’ birth on this earth. We also focus on his second and final return to this earth. Instead of being afraid of Judgment Day, we can look forward to it. Jesus has cleansed you of all dirty guilt. And when you stand before him – either at the end of the world or the end of your life – you do not need to fear. Jesus will receive you with open arms and welcome you to eternal happiness. We can hardly wait. Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come. Amen.