

Theme: When the Lord Comes Near, He Humbles His People.

Being an Old Testament prophet is kind of like driving to the Rocky Mountains. As you drive west towards the mountains, you can see them from incredibly far away, but what you see looks like one big mass of mountain peaks that are all exactly the same distance away. And because you can see them from so far away, the initial anticipation of catching sight of them makes the last leg of the journey seem to take forever to actually reach the Rockies. It's not until you get much closer to them that you can see which peaks are closer and which ones are farther. Even then, it's tough to tell how much distance is between the near one and the far ones. It's not until you're in them that you can really see the distance between peaks.

Driving to the Rockies messes with your perspective of time and distance in sort of the same way that an Old Testament prophet would look into the distant future and see some of the mountain peaks on the landscape of salvation, but wouldn't have a good perspective of time or distance between them. It would just seem like one wall of mountains.

That is why when we hear the words of the prophet Malachi in our text for today, he makes it seem like everything is all going to happen at once. He reports God's words, **"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. 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.**" (Mal. 3:1). That's not too hard to figure out. John the Baptist came preparing the way and immediately after him Jesus came.

But then the very next thing Malachi says seems like it's already talking about the heavenly courtroom on Judgement day, **"Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?"** (Mal 3:2) and **"I will come to put you on trial."** (Mal 3:5). That is a little confusing for us because we live in the time and distance of 2000 years thus far between the first coming of those messengers, John the Baptist and Jesus and the second coming of Jesus.

From Malachi's perspective, he knows the facts in general. The messenger is going to come and then Jesus is going to come. But he didn't necessarily have the perspective of time between the 1st and 2nd comings of Christ. The Bible tells us in 1 Peter 1:10, **"Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow."**

Malachi would have loved to know what we know about the 1st and the 2nd coming of Christ. Those two comings are what we are always keeping in mind during the season of Advent, not just his coming in the manger, but also his coming in the skies. And how different those two comings are from each other! Last week, we meditated on the fact that when the Lord came near at his first coming, he humbled himself. That truth we recognize at Christmas in the little baby boy Savior of the world lying in the manger.

This week we step forward in the progressions to see that ***when the Lord comes near, he also humbles his people.*** This he does at his first coming so that his people are ready and waiting for him at his second coming. But for those who don't receive him as Savior or humble themselves at his first coming, they will not find him so friendly when he comes again, not in humility, but in glory. On that day, he will come as Judge, and the books will be opened and **"who can endure that day? Who can stand?"** Malachi asks. So we take Malachi's questions

to heart as we point them to ourselves, “Will you meet him as Savior or will you meet him as judge?”¹

What the prophet Malachi could see clearly at the time is what was right in front of him—the disobedience of his people. They were at it again, like rebellious children. Apparently, the lessons hadn’t been learned even after they had been sent off to sit in perhaps the most dramatic timeout the world has ever seen— being sent off to captivity in Babylon.

Now they were back, and they were right back at it, not following the covenant or the decrees of the Lord, just as their ancestors had done before them. They were offering blemished sacrifices, sick and lame animals instead of the best that their God deserved. They were giving God the scraps and were robbing him blind by not bringing their tithes and offering. They were divorcing their spouses because they didn’t like them anymore and going off to marry foreign women with foreign gods. And the priests were telling them all of this was okay, that bad was good and good was bad, that **“all who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them.”** (Malachi 2:17)

They were back at it again and all of this within only a short time after coming back from captivity. The Lord was tired of it, literally. Malachi says to them, **“You have wearied the LORD with your words.”** (Mal. 2:17). And though Malachi is confronting his people, his words hit us squarely in the forehead as well. The weariness we cause our God, the ways we grieve his Holy Spirit, as rebellious children with sinful natures, always back at it again. Even after God has just initiated in our time one of the biggest timeouts the world has ever seen in the pandemic that stopped the world in its tracks, we’re back at it, back to the same old-same old, back to making short lived promises and half-hearted efforts that crash and burn moments later. Like a dog returning to its vomit or like a sow wallowing in the mud, we return to the same sins again and again. How could we ever be able to stand in the presence of the Lord when he comes near?

If we are standing on our own two feet, with our own laundry list of sins, the answer is we had better tremble. Malachi asks, **“Who can stand when he appears?”** (Mal. 3:2) and the obvious answer is no one! The truth is simple. Sinners cannot carry their sin with them into heaven before a holy God. He cannot tolerate it or them. Here what he says, **“I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless.”** (Malachi 3: 5) It is summed up for us once again in the New Testament as well, **“Wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God.”** (1 Corinthians 6:9).

But when the Lord makes us a promise when he comes near to us, **“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.”** (Malachi 3:2,3) He will do the cleaning. He will do the refining. Martin Luther grasped that truth deeply in his heart when he groaned, *“Lord, I’m tired of making promises to you. You must change me; I cannot change myself.”*²

The laundry can’t do itself any more than 10 karat gold can turn itself into 24 karat gold. The launderer must do it. The refiner must do it, and refining is never an easy or pretty process. That’s exactly our God has promised to be and do for us, if we will only let him!

¹ Mark Paustian, *More Prepared to Answer*. Northwestern Publishing House. P. 188.

² Qtd in *More Prepared to Answer*. P 211

“Return to me and I will return to you!” (Malachi 3:7) He beckons! He pleads! He longs to scrub the filth of all the broken empty promises and the wallowing in the mud and wash it away from us. He longs to burn out the impurities that defile us and separates us from our sins. The painful preparation for this work is done by the fire of his law as he humbles us and brings us to repentance. But when his law has done its humbling work, he is quick take hold of us with by his gracious hand. It’s the wonder of his grace that he does not discard us with the wicked and corrupted but seizes us for his own and rejoices over us his newfound treasure.

The whole process sounds unpleasant. It was much more so for him than it was for us, as it was his own right hand that endured the heat of hell itself and it was his own blood that he used to do the washing. But don’t get lost in the fire and the smelting and the scrubbing and the washing without seeing through to the end, the final treasure that God has for himself. You were wrongdoers, not fit for the kingdom of heaven, **“but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.”** (1 **Corinthians 6:11**). God has made you his perfect and holy people, washed, refined, and purified by water and the word and by his blood.

So we can revisit Malachi’s terrifying questions with a fresh confidence. Who can stand when the Lord appears? Those whose hearts the Lord has humbled, and refined, and renewed at his first coming can stand before him with confidence when he comes again. Those who met and found him as Savior will find that he does not change. They will find him as Savior when he comes again.

As we wait for that time to come, for the next mountain peak of salvation to draw near, we are not left twiddling our thumbs. Malachi told the people that the Lord’s refining work would affect them even as they lived. **“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 the days gone by, as in former years.”** (Malachi 3:3,4).

This pleasing priesthood thing is not just about them, it’s about us too. **“God gave himself to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”** (Titus 2:14). **“You are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”** (1 Peter 2:5). These are the sacrifices of a broken and contrite heart that God will not despise. When the Lord comes near, he humbles his people, so that he may lift them up on the Last Day. Amen.

Now dear friends, since we have these promises, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. 2 Corinthians 7:1