

We were putting the Christmas tree up and all that good stuff, pumping the tunes. As decorations were going up and people were smiling and it smelled of cinnamon and cheer, because of course it did, the song, "We Need a Little Christmas" by Johnny Mathis came on. Catchy ditty! "Need a little Christmas, right this very minute...hasn't snowed a single flurry, but Santa dear we're in a hurry." I was listening, bobbing my head a long, not dancing, just bobbing, and as I was listening I thought, "This is a cry for help!" Listen to him! Everything is, "Now, now, now," all this urgency. But listen to these lines, "Put up the tree before my spirit falls again...For I've grown a little leaner, grown a little colder, Grown a little sadder, grown a little older And I need a little angel sitting on my shoulder Need a little Christmas now." Spirits falling again. Colder. Sadder. Alone. In pretty desperate need of something more than some tinsel and a sting of lights!

The song's not wrong. Not as direct as some others about being sad at Christmas, this one speaks more to the gradual wearing away of optimism, the general loss of good cheer everyone who lives here experiences. From Adam, to Abraham, to David, to Jesus, to now, to then, all people will be worn down by life and will do the common to people thing of looking, of hoping for something real to pick them up, fill them, sustain them. God, who never changes, is that hope.

Malachi, a prophet during the Temple's rebuilding days, was sent by God to tell the people that just because they were back from Babylon didn't mean they were God's favorites now who could do whatever they wanted. Nope. Malachi called them out about being no better than the generations before them who caused the Babylonian exile in the first place. They were repeating the same sins and inventing new ones. Like the other prophets, Malachi reminded them of God's will. He also spoke about the day the Lord, the messenger of the covenant whom they desire, would appear. It would be intense. Malachi says, "*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. **(Malachi 3:1)** Not a day that would set them up as worldly rulers. Instead: "*But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.*" **(Malachi 3:2)**

Refining ore, removing its impurities to produce pure metal, is searing, labor-intensive work. Gold boils at 5,137 degrees, and silver at 3,924. Scraping slag off the top during refinement sounds unbearable. How much more to be in the crucible! No one can withstand that kinda heat, no one can withstand the day of the Lord. It refines like a furnace, it purifies like lye, like bleach. God is very active in this. Here's a helpful Luther quote, "Christ is not merely Purifier but also the purifying Agent. He is not only the Blacksmith but also the Fire; not only the Cleaner but also the Soap. He does not sit indolently at the right hand of his Father...So he is elsewhere called Salvation, and not just Savior." God is no peddler of idle words, he honors them by acting on them himself. Refinement, purification would happen and the first thing refined? The Levites. The Refiner Lord testifies, "*I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,*" says the LORD Almighty. **(Malachi 3:5)** They were guilty of these things. So what hope did they have on the Lord's judgment? They didn't have to wait to find out. God said, "*I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.*" ^{7b} *Return to me, and I will return to you.*" says the LORD Almighty. **(Malachi 3:6-7b)** Their only hope to not be destroyed was that God doesn't change, that he, the I AM WHO I AM, promised to be gracious to them, to forgive every time when they returned in repentance.

Matthew and Luke attest that Malachi 3 is first fulfilled with the preaching of John the Baptist, the one preparing the way before Jesus by preaching repentance before the arrival of the long awaited Jesus. John showed people what repentant living looked like in daily life. Later on, speaking with fire, when accused of being a drunk and setting aside the law, Jesus reminded that he kept and honored it, so much so, in fact, that he taught anyone who looked lustfully or thought scornfully broke the law. Jesus testified against every aspect of law breaking, including the self-righteousness which so tightly gripped so many. In love, Jesus showed them they were not pure, just white washed tombs. The purifying truth of Jesus stung worse than lye. Jesus also made a whip of cords to purify the Temple. He went around showing what God's compassion looked like by giving hope to the broken hearted that in him they were forgiven. Jesus is the world's hope because he took away its sin when he died on the cross. Jesus is the Savior. Jesus is Salvation. Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus set up a new group of Levites to do his work and share the good news. It's the priesthood of all believers. The Lord who doesn't change promised his followers then that he'd never leave them or forsake them but would love, forgive, and be with them always.

How do we, people who know about Jesus' first coming prepare for his second? By remembering Malachi's words. His day can happen any time. Malachi called out the priests and Levites, Jesus the Pharisees, and the Word still speaks to us, indicting us. How? By confronting this thinking, "I know the Bible pretty well, yes I do. I've been going to Bible class for ages." Knowledge is great, yes, but are we also doing? Consider **Malachi 3:5** again. Have I worshipped God only as his Word guides, been pure sexually, been honest, been a good employer/worker, protected those with greatest potential for exploitation? I have not always done/been those things. I have been a Pharisee. What hope do I have in the face of certain judgment which begins with the house of God? None found in me.

What God calls us to do in the Minor Prophets like Malachi is admit that he knows this and admit it ourselves excuse free. We have no hope in judgment because we're impure, burned away if up to us only. This is the first step in repentance, admitting this to God. The next is basking in the goodness of God's unchanging and forgiving love, "*I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.*"^{7b} *Return to me and I will return to you.*" (**Malachi 3:6-7b**). The unchanging-ness of God is our hope because it means that his grace promised to us won't change, always there for us, that we are forgiven for Jesus' sake, and that he will return and bring us to heaven. Because of God's unchanging nature, we know he loves us and forgives when we repent. This is all the preparation we need for Christmas, the day forgiveness was born.

Jesus has purified us and since he loves us, Jesus continues to refine us into his implements for doing his will of offering pure and living sacrifices and as you share his name. Jesus makes us perfect. Be who Jesus made you to be: a purified and refined, redeemed, restored, living in thankful repentance, sinner whose hope for heaven and joy for every day, right this very minute, is in his covenant of unchanging grace. Amen.