

Second Sunday in Advent

Malachi 3:1-4

“The Cry Carries to Us”

Look! I am sending my messenger! He will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord, whom you are seeking, will come to his temple! The Messenger of the Covenant, in whom you delight, will surely come, says the LORD of Armies.

But who can endure the day when he comes? Who will remain standing when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire, like launderers bleach! He will be seated like a refiner and a purifier of silver. He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and like silver. They will belong to the LORD and bring him an offering in righteousness.

Malachi is the last in a long line. For centuries before him, God sent prophets to Israel. These prophets spoke in different ways, at different times, in different places. They used different language and imagery. Some wrote very short books, only a few verses. Some wrote fat volumes, dozens of chapters. But all the prophets that came before Malachi, one after another, came with a single basic message: Sin has destroyed the connection between God and man. And God promises that he himself will come to forgive that sin, to reunite himself with humankind.

The prophets before Malachi have given vivid details about who the Savior will be: God himself with us! They have quoted the Savior ahead of time, telling us what he will say. They have previewed the Savior’s actions, including his death and his resurrection. They have even told us the place of his birth, and the place he will grow up. All the prophets before Malachi pointed ahead to Jesus. They did this so people could identify and trust in the promised Savior after he arrived.

Now, standing at the end of that long line of prophets, Malachi looks back and reaffirms their central message: sin has broken the bond between God and humankind. A Savior will come to bring us back to God. In that way, Malachi’s prophecy is like all the rest. He reaches back to that promise made before him.

But Malachi’s prophecy is also different. For all those details the prophets before him have already given about who the Savior is, what he will say, and what he will accomplish, Malachi adds another. He gives God’s people one more sign to identify their Messiah, who will save them. The Lord speaks through Malachi: **Look! I am sending my messenger! He will prepare the way before me.** Malachi tells us that one more great messenger from God – one more prophet – will come before the Savior arrives. And this great messenger will come just before the Savior comes into the world. The Savior will follow right behind him: **Then suddenly the Lord, whom you are seeking, will come to his temple. The Messenger of the Covenant, in whom you delight, will come, says the LORD of Armies.**

This great messenger who comes right before the Savior and prepares the way for him is John the Baptist. Today in the Gospel of St. Luke we heard what that last messenger before the Messiah, John the Baptist, did to prepare the way for our Savior: **He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.** John was Jesus’ final forerunner. And when he came, he came with this cry: “Repent, for the Lord is coming!” John said this about himself: **“I am the voice of**

one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’” Straighten out your heart before Jesus arrives. That’s another way of saying, “Repent.”

And why that message? Why the message of “Repent, before your Savior comes!”? Malachi writes about the coming Savior: **But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?** This is the cry that Malachi looked back to and looked ahead to, the timeless cry that John the Baptist made again, and that reaches all the way across the ages to us. It is the timeless cry: A person who stands before Jesus, the Son of God, on his own merit cannot stand before him at all. A person who tries to endure the day when the Savior comes on his own will not endure it all. Before Jesus comes, Christians need to repent. Malachi pointed ahead to John as Jesus’ last forerunner, and John cried out, “Repent!” This cry reaches us, too.

The question for us is this: Are we listening to the cry of John the Baptist? “Repent!” is not an easy word to hear. In that word, “repent” there is an implicit accusation that we have done wrong. And that is a message no one likes to hear. When the cry, “Repent!” rings out, there may be other voices and cries we would rather listen to.

There is the cry of my world that tells me right and wrong are a fairy tale. A character on a television show I was watching said, “Dad, there is no right or wrong, only the consequences of our actions. You taught me that.” And then they hugged. How wonderful. How special. And perhaps without realizing it, the audience learned that they can do wrong. If it were one line on one television show, the harm would be minimal. But it’s not. You and I are surrounded by voices that say, “Right is what you make it. Wrong is what you make it. And you don’t have to be sorry for what you choose. It’s your life and your choice, after all.” Do we listen to the cry, “Repent!” or the one the cry of our world: “No need to repent. What is right and what is wrong is what you make them”?

There are also cries inside of us that say, “You do not need to repent. After all, you have done far more good than bad in your life. You hold down a steady job. You love your family and care for them. You even volunteer in your city. You even help at church. Certainly, if you were to weigh the good of your life against the bad, you are a good person.” Do we listen to the cry, “Repent!” or the one that says, “No need to repent. You are mostly a good person”?

And then there is this cry that says, “It is the others who need to repent. The lazy people who sleep in and skip church. Here you are, after all. Yeah, maybe you had to drag yourself in and you’re not too glad to be here, but you’re here! The other people who aren’t here, they need to repent! Those vulgar people who throw around Jesus’ name like it’s nothing, they need to repent. Yeah, maybe you rattle off some prayers in Jesus’ name without really thinking about it, but that’s not as bad as what they do. They need to repent! These people who sleep around and stare at filthy websites, they need to repent, not you! Sure, you may have laughed at some dirty jokes and let your eyes wander from your spouse, but who doesn’t? They need to repent, not you.” Do we listen to the cry, “Repent!” or the one that says, “Repentance is for other people, the serious sinners, not for you”?

And when he’s listening to those other voices, the Christian will bow his head to pray. And he will ask God for this, and he will ask God for that, and he may even imply that God owes him this or that. But among

all those requests he will forget to say that he is sorry, that in reality he deserves nothing from God but punishment. Listening to those other voices, a Christian rises to confess his sins in church. But the words just rattle off of his tongue without any serious thought or sincerity.

Listen to the cry of the one Malachi pointed to. Listen to John the Baptist's cry: "Repent!" Right and wrong is real, written in stone by the Lord of the universe. They are not a myth. They are reality. And the truth is that even your very best works are tainted by sin. On our own, nothing we do is good. And there is no point in comparing yourself to others and their failures: **"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** All those other cries from outside and inside do nothing but plant lethal pride in the heart, self-righteous pride that kills repentance, pride that drowns out the cry, "Repent!"

The cry, "Repent!" demands that we return to the holy law of God; that we listen to what he says about right and wrong, not only in regard to actions, but also thoughts and words. It requires us to compare honestly every thought, word, and action of our lives to God's holy standard, and to hear his verdict of eternal punishment for every sin. And then, in sorrow for our sin, to beg God's forgiveness.

And then repentant hearts hear another cry. Malachi writes: **Then suddenly, the Lord, whom you are seeking, will come to his temple. The Messenger of the Covenant, in whom you delight, will surely come, says the LORD of Armies.** Hearts that turn to God in sorrow, pleading for his mercy, hear him say, "My Son comes for you, for all your sin. You need him; your heart desires what he brings: my forgiveness and mercy. And he comes. The one you desire comes."

He comes crying out, too: **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."** But his cries continue: when he is tempted by Satan to sin, he cries out against Satan with the Word of God, and beats him back. When he is tempted by his own disciple to abandon God's mission for his life, he cries out, "Behind me!" He cries out against sin and overcomes it, resisting every temptation, living his holy life. The cries of his perfect life are what we desire, for they tell us he lived perfectly in our place. And then he climbs Calvary, is nailed to its cross and cries out, **"It is finished!"** That cry is what our hearts desire, for it tells us his cleansing blood has purified us from all sins. In your repentance, hear the cry of your Savior say, "I lived and died for you. You are forgiven."

Malachi writes about the Messiah's work: **For he will be like a refiner's fire, like launderers' bleach! He will be seated like a refiner and a purifier of silver. He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.** Hear God's cry that his Son has purified you of every sin.

For thousands of years, God has sent out messengers with the cry, "Repent!" From the prophets of the Old Testament, with Malachi standing at the end, to John the Baptist, to Jesus himself, to the apostles of the New Testament, the cry "Repent" has rung out again and again. Many have heard the cry and stubbornly turned away, thinking themselves good enough the way they are. And then, there are others. There are others that God drops to their knees and picks up again with his gracious forgiveness. There are others, who by God's grace hear and listen to the cry, "Repent!" and turn to their Savior for forgiveness.

But Malachi tells us that the story of repentance does not quite end there. He writes: **Judah and Jerusalem's offerings will be pleasing to the LORD as they were in days of old, in years long ago.** Malachi

tells us that when people repent, their lives change. Now they bring the Lord pleasing offerings. And that's about a lot more than money; it's about the offering we make to God with our whole lives. John the Baptist, to whom he pointed, said the same thing. To those who heard his cry, "Repent!" and trusted in the Savior Jesus, John then said: **"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."**

In other words, repentant people show they are repentant by the way they live. You have heard the cry of John to repent. You have heard your Savior God's cry of forgiveness. Now show it in your life. Where have failed to keep God's law in your own life? What sins have you laid before God to be forgiven? In the joy of his forgiveness, in the relief of his promises, show your gratitude for his forgiveness. Produce the fruit of repentance.

Sometimes the fruit of repentance is hard to nail down, but normally it is very, very easy. Have you been selfish and greedy? Then open your wallet to someone in need. Have you been nasty and short with your spouse or children? Be nicer. Have you slacked off at work? Then start working harder. See how easy this is? The list of possibilities could almost go on forever, and they are usually obvious. The trick is usually not knowing what the fruit of repentance is, but embracing the power to produce it: when we are sorry for sin, when we hear Jesus cry, "You're forgiven," it changes the way the live. We produce fruit, we live good lives, that show we are sorry, forgiven people.

Hear the cry, "Repent!" and turn to God in sorrow for your sins. Then hear the cry of your Savior, "Your sins are forgiven." And produce the fruit of repentance; be the repentant and forgiven Christian you are. Amen.