

“The Coming Messenger”

Malachi 3:1-4; 4:1-6

ADVENT 2

December 9, 2018

Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

On this Second Sunday of Advent,
we conclude the Narrative Lectionary’s
assigned reading from the Old Testament.

In September we began with the Old
Testament’s first book-Genesis,
and now in December we conclude
with its last book- Malachi.

In the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh, Malachi is
the last book of the minor Prophets which
concludes the second subdivision of
holy scripture-the prophets.

Tanakh is an acronym of the first Hebrew
letter of each of the three major sections:
Torah, “Teaching” also known as the
Five Books of Moses;
Nevi’im, “Prophets”, and Ketuvim “Writings”,
hence TaNaKh

So the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh concludes,
not with the Prophets like our Bible does,
but with the writings.

The last book in the Hebrew Bible then
is Second Chronicles which concludes
with this verse:

“Thus says King Cyrus of Persia:
The LORD, the God of heaven,
has given me all the kingdoms of
the earth, and he has changed me
to build him a house at Jerusalem,
which is in Judah.

Whoever is among you of all his
people, may the LORD his God
be with him. Let him go up” (36:23)

What I just read was King Cyrus of Persia,
the conqueror of Babylon issuing an edict
freeing the Jews exiled in Babylon.
to return to their Judean homeland and
to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem so
that they may worship their God.

This reading from Second Chronicles serves as
fitting introduction for our reading from
the last prophet who spoke on behalf of
God to his people-Malachi.

Who is this prophet Malachi?

What is known about Malachi from
his own writing is only his name (1:1)
which means literally “my messenger”

We do not know exact dates of
Malachi’s life and ministry.

It is probably after the Jews have returned
from exile and the temple has been rebuilt
through the leadership of Ezra around 516BCE.

The reference to a governor in verse light of the
the first chapter suggests the Persians
were still in power.

From reading this short, four chapter book,
we learn from Malachi that the task of
rebuilding Jerusalem physically as well as
spiritually was daunting to its inhabitants.

Malachi’s audience had grown weary and
cynical: serving God seemed like drudgery.

For them God seemed absent.

The prevailing thought seemed to be:

“If God does not care, why should we?”

Malachi’s prophetic ministry addresses
this state of exhausted despair.

I can associate with that feeling.

At a time when congregations like ours
are aging and the younger generations
are not actively involved, the work of

ministry and mission can become a drudgery
when the few people involved are exhausted
doing the work that requires many.

In many ways Malachi still speaks to us.

The book of Malachi is comprised of a series
of six short sermons.

This gives us an idea of the situation Malachi
addressed in his time.

All is not well, and the prophet clearly
pointed that out.

The first sermon is stated at the outset of
the book (1:1-5).

The destruction of Israel's longtime enemy, Edom,
is a reminder that the LORD's power
goes beyond the borders of Israel.

The clergy are in for the sharpest criticism
They have failed in their calling to provide
the best worship in the temple (1:6-2:9).

The priests in charge of the education program
have also failed, "you have caused many
to stumble in your instruction" (2:7-9)

In a criticism that seems out of place in our
culture of tolerance, intermarriage was
causing religious problems in the homes (2:10)

Divorce has become a scandal.

"I hate divorce," says the LORD

Husbands who have been unfaithful to their
wives have become a metaphor for
the people's unfaithfulness to the LORD.

In a fourth short message, Malachi brings
up the people's complaint that
the LORD is unjust (2:17)

They are involved in bizarre magical practices (3:5)

They also commit adultery, swear by other gods;
the rich do not care for the powerless-
the widow, the orphan, and the refugee;

Malachi concludes with two short sermons:

the people are cheating God in their growing (3:6-12)
and the people are complaining, "Our religion
is a waste of time; the evil prosper and
we suffer, it's not fair." (3:13-4:3)

This brings us to today's text
Familiar to many of us because of its
appearance in Handel's Messiah,
this passage speaks of purification and judgment,
themes not associated in the popular imagination
with Christmas.

Nevertheless, Advent is, of course,
preparation not only for the remembrance of
Christ's first coming as a baby in Bethlehem,
but also for Christ's second coming
in power and glory.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes of this theme
of judgement in an Advent sermon that
he prepared and preached in 1928.

Bonhoeffer wrote:

"It is very remarkable that we face the
thought that God is coming,
so calmly, whereas previously people
trembled at the day of God...
We have become so accustomed to the idea
of divine love and of God's coming at
Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver
of fear that God's coming should arouse in us.
We are indifferent to the message,
taking only the pleasant and agreeable
out of it and forgetting the serious aspect,
that the God of the world draws near
to the people of our little earth and
lays claim to us.

The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings,
but first of all frightening news for
everyone who has a conscience."

Bonhoeffer goes on to say,

“Only when we have felt the terror of
the matter, can we recognize the
incomparable kindness
God comes into the very mindset of
evil and death, and judges the evil
in us and in the world.
And by judging us, God cleanse and
sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love.

Like Malachi, Bonhoeffer, too, offers us
an apt word this Advent season in 2018.

God is coming.

God is coming as a baby in a manger.

but God is coming again

“In glory to judge the living and the dead.”

as the Nicene Creed puts it.

and our response?

Any reasonable person should feel

at least some fear.

Like the other so-called minor prophets
before him like Amos, Hosea, and Zechariah,
Malachi also warns his hearers of
the coming judgement: “But who can endure
the day of his coming, and who can stand
when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s
fire and like fuller’s soap” (3:2).

Like one who burns away the dross in order
to refine gold, God will burn away
all evil within us.

Like one who uses harsh soap to clean
a garment, God will bleach out
the stains that sin leaves in us.

Refining gold and cleaning clothes are
restoring activities, but from the perspective
of the gold and the clothing
the process hold the prospect of much pain

We would do well to feel some fear.

In this Advent text, we are far from Bethlehem
and the sweet strains of “Away in a Manger.”

This text is usually paired with the song
of Zechariah's after the birth of John
the Baptist in Luke's gospel (1:68-79),
and the account of the beginning of
John's ministry of repentance and baptism (3:1-6)

The Gospel writes, especially Matthew
use Malachi to speak about the role
of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist is the one Jesus refers to
as "my messenger" "sent" to prepare
the way before me" (3:1)

He is Elijah, the one Malachi foretells.
in chapter four: " Lo, I will send
the prophet Elijah before the
great and terrible day of the LORD comes" (4:5)

After Malachi there would be no more prophets.
For 400 years there would be no prophetic
voice in Israel.

Until...until one John the Baptist appears
in the wilderness dressed like Elijah,
living on a similar diet,
and proclaiming a message of repentance
until the coming of the LORD.

The writer of Matthew's gospel recognized
Malachi's coming messenger in the
person of John the Baptist

Beloved people of God,
the prophet Malachi looks back-
on the covenant which God has made
with his people which they did not keep;
and it looks forward to the coming
reign of God.

God has fulfilled this promise in the
person we still await this Advent season-
the Prince of Peace, our Lord and Savior
Jesus the Christ.

Amen