

Sermon – “All Flesh Shall See the Salvation”
Sunday, December 9, 2018
Scripture Readings: Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6
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Malachi is the book placed last in the Christian ordering of the Old Testament. It is a book of prophecy, and little detail is known about its author—in fact, it is not entirely clear whether “Malachi” is a proper name or simply means “my messenger.” It was written some time after the rebuilding of the Jewish temple, and can be placed somewhere between two and five hundred years before Christ. Listen for the Word of God to you in Malachi chapter 3, verses 1 through 4.

^{3:1} See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² 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 fullers’ soap; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

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Our second reading comes to us from the Gospel According to Luke, in the third chapter, verses 1 through 6. It speaks of the beginning of the public ministry of John the Baptist, in which he proclaims the coming Christ. Listen for God’s Word to you.

^{3:1} In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make [the Lord’s] paths straight.*

*⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”*

It was late one cold night in Princeton, New Jersey, when my fire department pager went off. Manpower was needed for a search—an elderly lady who suffered from Alzheimer’s Disease had gone missing from her home and could not be found. We came together, rapidly divided up sections of the nearby parts of town, and headed out, armed with flashlights.

Sometimes you get lucky, a quick, systematic drive-through of every road in the area, shining lights in every yard and down every alley, proves enough. This time, no one was to be seen, and we tackled the neighborhoods in small teams on foot, checking behind bushes and trees, between and under cars, anywhere a person could conceivably get to. We had multiple groups doing this sort of search throughout the town, trying to cover everywhere within a radius that she could have reached in the amount of time she had been missing. We checked for unlocked doors, too, because a cold, disoriented person might attempt to take shelter anywhere.

And we found one, too—an unlocked alley door in the side of an otherwise fully locked-up non-residential building—so we proceeded into the fairly large structure and began a thorough search of as much of the space as we could access, floor by floor. It was late, and it was cold, she had been gone a while, so it was a big relief when our radios suddenly came to life: part of my search team, a pair who was up on another floor of the same building, had located her, alive and well.

We have come to Advent, the time of year where we, wandering in the dark without clear understanding of our surroundings in this world, voice our deepest hopes that we, too, shall one day soon be found, and shall be alive and well.

We have mixed feelings about this, though. We call for the Lord, and we hide from God’s coming. Being found by God means being seen through-and-through. We know ourselves, and we do not always wish to be seen that fully. “Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” the prophet Malachi asks. For the coming of the Lord involves purification, which is likened to passing through a fire in which all that is tainted and gone wrong within us is burned away.¹ The prophets and scriptures tell us repeatedly: any of us who look at ourselves with honest and open eyes cannot but have some fear toward the day justice truly rules,² even as our deepest longing is for that day to come with haste.

Our longing remains for the Lord to come quickly, though, even in the face of our inadequacy before God, for what lies on the other side of our Lord’s arrival calls to us and speaks of a hope so high we can hardly hope to hope it. Every mountain and hill shall be made low!³ The obstacles we have built within us which separate us from our Creator will be torn down. The crooked shall be made straight!⁴ Our straying ways, all the twisted tangles of self which we despair even to examine or follow, will be straightened. We are talking about restoration. This is what we dare to hope for in Advent.

¹ See Malachi 3:1-3. Quote is from verse 2 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² Besides the whole of Malachi chapter 3, see also for instance Amos 5, Zephaniah 1:14-18, Joel 1-2, Matthew 25, and Revelation 6:12-17.

³ From Luke 3:5, which is referring back to Isaiah 40:4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Someone in the church recently asked me where to find scripture that spoke of renewal of the body, words, if any such words might be found, that spoke about our resurrected selves being remade with the corrosions of age and illness being wiped away in a full regeneration of our true selves. I was reminded shortly thereafter of the fifteenth chapter of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, which speaks to this question directly. Let me read you some of the words of 1 Corinthians 15:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ...

But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?"...

[Y]ou do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed...Not all flesh is alike...There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed; star differs from star in glory.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body...The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven...

[T]he trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"⁵

This promise is surely seen as an audacious, bold hope of deliverance by anyone who is old enough to begin to know of the failings of the body and of the mind. We know of the holes left, the pieces eroded away from our very selves, by time and disease.

But every valley shall be filled.⁶

We all know, even those of us who do not yet know any but good health, that our weaknesses are not confined to the body, but that even our wills are found feeble, in times and places of both little and great consequence, and our virtue, too, is perishable.

But the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth.

⁵ The whole of 1 Corinthians 15 is well worth reading on this subject, but quoted above are verse 20-22, 35, 37b, 39a, 40-44, 47, and 52b-55 (NRSV). Verse 55 seems to be alluding to earlier scripture found in Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14.

⁶ Again from Luke 3:5, referring back to Isaiah 40:4.

Fire is hot, and the fuller's soap is harsh,⁷ but even as we fear these things we also yearn for the promise of that cleansing, for the day on which "all flesh shall see the salvation of God,"⁸ when the kingdom of heaven is fully realized and we are fully at home there, fully ourselves, in the embrace of God.

It was late one cold night in Princeton, New Jersey, when my fire department pager went off. An elderly woman, with failing memory, confused, not dressed for the weather, had left her place of residence, seeking something, and had gone roaming through the freezing streets at night, eventually coming upon a door, finding it unlocked, and going inside. Frail of body, frail of mind, she had traversed the rooms and hallways of a completely unlit interior, somehow without tripping over anything, even a flight of stairs without taking a fall, winding her way to where we found her: sitting quietly in the dark, by herself, in a sanctuary pew of the Princeton United Methodist Church.

It had been her church. She may not have known why she was there, but she knew it as home when she came to it. A back, alley door which surely was ordinarily locked even in the daytime was, on this one night of all nights, forgotten and left unsecured, and a woman was kept safe whose recollection failed her in so many everyday things but who nonetheless knew the place where she belonged. May we always remember this so well as she. Glory be to God, whose coming we await in joyful hope, looking forward to that day when all of us, who wander together the roads of life, shall enter into the eternal sanctuary, worshiping finally in fullness of understanding, restored and renewed. Amen.

⁷ See Malachi 3:2-3. A fuller, based on this and a few other Biblical references, seems to have been someone who cleansed and whitened clothing using harsh chemicals.

⁸ Luke 3:6, referring back to Isaiah 40:5.