

In our Advent series – “Who are you waiting for” – we’re looking at how the prophets talked about the Messiah, the one that was to come. So we’re looking at a different prophet each week. Last week was Jeremiah, we’ll hit up Zephaniah and Micah before the season’s out, and this week we’re reading from a prophet that we don’t often preach on – Malachi. So to get us started, we should look at what exactly is going on when Malachi speaks to the people of Israel.

Malachi is situated at the end of the Old Testament, but that doesn’t tell us too much about where it falls chronologically in the life of Israel. What we do know is that there’s a functioning temple in Jerusalem, meaning the prophecy is written to Israel after they returned from exile and built the Second Temple under Ezra. So – Jeremiah last week was talking to the people during the exile – Malachi is talking to the people after they’ve returned home.

And when the people returned, things went pretty well for a while! The people were committed – they rebuilt the temple, they dedicated their lives to God, they lived in grateful obedience.

But old habits die hard...and by the time Malachi appears on the scene, the people have lost some of that initial vigor and have slid into their pre-exilic ways. They’ve become apathetic in their faith and lazy in their worship. Even the priests aren’t practicing what they preach. And so God, through Malachi, enters into debate with the people, calling them back to covenant faithfulness. It’s a pretty direct conversation – the first-person singular for God is used in 47 of the 55 verses of this book. God has a lot to say.

And in our passage today, God gets right to it.

“You have wearied the Lord with your words.”

That's such a good line, isn't it? You can just hear the fatigue in it. "You have wearied the Lord with your words." Just stop already.

The people, clueless to their beleaguering ways, pop back up and say, "How? How have we wearied you?"

God responds: "By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them,' or 'Where is the God of justice?'"

So we're not just talking about the weariness of your three-year old kids plying you with a thousand questions as you try to put them to bed.

This is a people who have fundamentally missed the point of who God is, and God is tired of it.

And they've missed this point because things haven't exactly turned out for Israel. Yes, they're home from exile. Yes, they have a new temple. Yes, they've rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. But they are still a tiny little backwoods province in the massive kingdom of Persia. Nothing like their former glory.

The bad guys, at the end of the day, still seem to have won. And if that's the case, what's the point in being a good guy?

So the people whine. "Where is the God of justice? Does he in fact favor the wicked? If God doesn't care, why should we?"

They've fallen into a religious malaise, but also a bit of a religious predicament. On the one hand, *they* have stopped caring. On the other hand, they complain that God doesn't care enough.

So God shows them just how invested he is.

Unfortunately, the NIV doesn't demonstrate quite how feisty God is feeling. The Hebrew of chapter 3 begins with "hineh," or a "See here! Listen up!"

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way for me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.”

This verse begs a very important question. Who is this messenger? The Hebrew for messenger is “malach,” – and since “I” signifies the first-person possessive, Malach-I becomes “my messenger.” So perhaps it’s this prophet.

The Lectionary places this prophecy along with the Gospel reading of John the Baptist, who echoes the call, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord!” So maybe that’s the messenger God is talking about.

But this verse also describes this messenger as “the Lord you are seeking,” using a term which often refers to Yahweh.

So perhaps the answer is “yes.” God’s messenger is Malachi, God’s messengers are the prophets, God’s messenger is the son of Zechariah, God’s messenger is God himself, in the person of Christ, in his coming both as a babe and when he comes upon the clouds in judgment.

For judgment is what this messenger brings with him. And not just judgment on Israel’s enemies. Not just judgment on Persia.

Judgment on Israel herself.

“You want justice?” says God? “I’ll give you justice. A justice that none can escape.” “Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?” No one. Judgment comes for all.

This is obviously one of the less cheerful themes of Advent, but it’s a pretty important one. Fleming Rutledge is a preacher and theologian who published a marvelous book on Advent a few years ago, and she says, “Advent most closely mirrors the daily lives of Christians and of the church and presents the most accurate picture of the human

condition.” If that’s true, then in Advent we have to reckon with the fact that the human condition is more than a little beat up.

Advent is a season of praying for light in the midst of darkness. And when we talk about the darkness, we do so as something that’s “out there,” something outside of us. When we come with our laments and our sorrows, we bring before God those things in the world that we cannot change but long to. We pray against war, against leaders who seem to seek their own gain, we pray against the darkness of illness, the vitriol of online discussions, the despair of natural disasters.

We are, I think, pretty good at praying that God might correct, might break through the heavens and fix the systemic symptoms of sin in the world, those things that seem to be built into the fabric of the cosmos as a result of communal pride and greed and animosity.

We are less comfortable asking that God would break through the heavens and fix us.

Some friends asked me earlier this week what I was preaching on, and I jokingly said, “Well, the text is Malachi 3, so it’ll basically be hellfire and brimstone.” And we laughed because we know we don’t preach such sermons anymore, that we’re enlightened now and far superior to those preachers of yore who preached with such declarative judgment that you were certain lightning would strike as soon as he uttered “Amen!”

But it’s possible the pendulum has swung a little too far in the other direction. John Calvin once said that the human mind was a perpetual factory of idols. We are constantly making God in our own image. One of the prevailing mantras of today is that judgment is perhaps the worst sin. Judge not, lest ye be judged. We are called to be tolerant, to love

with no strings attached, to ask nothing of people other than that they be allowed to be who they are, however they define that.

And thus, says Fleming Rutledge, “one of the idols of our own time is the idol we have made of a God who never judges anyone or anything. We have created a God who accepts everyone “just as they are” and never says anything against us, because that would be “judgmental.”

And yes, it is true that God loves us unconditionally, that he does beckon us to *come* just as we are. There is a wideness in God’s mercy, an unfathomable depth to his patience and forbearance and love for us, warts and all.

But when Jesus ate with sinners, when he saved a woman from stoning, when he healed people, he didn’t say, “Well this was great. Carry on.” He said to them, “Go and sin no more.”

We miss one of the key components to the character of God if we think of him as only a benevolent, loving, kindly grandfather in whose eyes his children can do no wrong.

Rather, says Rutledge, the overall testimony of the Old and New Testament is that God will save us *from the* judgment, but he won’t save us *without* judgment.

Because to say that God is love, and God is righteous, and God is just, is to say that God is therefore against anything that is *not* love or righteous or just. That he must stand against these things, that he must condemn these things.

And that he must condemn these things, not in some sweeping proclamation that gets tacked up on a billboard or shared on a Facebook page. No, to pray for God’s justice to be done, to pray that God would root out the evil of this world, this is to pray that God would

root out the evil in us. Not in the person over there. Not in the people on Parliament Hill, not in the leaders of foreign countries. In us.

The people of Israel hadn't bargained on that. Which is perhaps surprising, given their fairly recent history of exile as punishment. They wanted the God of total acceptance, the God who would back them up when they came face to face with the enemy, the God who would fight for them without expecting much in return. Not the God of judgment.

But here's the thing about judgment. Rutledge writes in one of her sermons that judgment, with today's negative connotation, only entered the Oxford English Dictionary in the twentieth century. That's pretty recent as far as language goes! Prior to this, to judge something meant to discern its value or worth.

To judge a thing is to look at a piece of rock picked up out of a stream, and to discern the gold hidden within.

And if you found such a rock, would you not do everything you could to free the gold from the sediment surrounding it?

I was watching a show once about colonial Virginia, and the quest for gold and silver in its mountains. A character believed he had found silver, and so he raced back to the settlement and immediately they set up a process to determine its worth. The metal was melted in a fiery heat, and then molten lead was added to which would cling all the impurities, until all that remained was the silver.

And so God's judgment comes as a refining fire, as a molten lead being poured on us. And of course we don't like this, this heaviness, this weight. But implicit in this judgment, implicit in God's disapproval and his hatred of all things evil and sinful is the idea of liberation.

There is this beautiful truth that God isn't going to leave us to our own devices. God does not give up on us. God knows what lies within our

dusty, dirty sediment-filled selves. He knows because he put it there - his image, with its capacity for love, for creativity, for acts of kindness and justice and mercy.

God does not give up on us. In his love, in his mercy, in his judgment, he is choosing us, and calling out of us that which is good, that which is holy, that which is just, that which is righteous.

And so in his grace, God shows us what it is in our lives that need to be rooted out, that needs to be melted away.

And that judgment likely doesn't come through a lightning bolt, or the actual face of God breaking through the heavens to shout at us.

Thankfully, judgment comes in slightly less awful, but no less convicting ways, in mini moments of apocalypse.

Steve Mathonet Vanderwell is a retired RCA pastor from Iowa, and a few years ago he wrote an essay on apocalypse for the Reformed Journal blog. He wrote that the word apocalyptic means "revealing, disclosure, unveiling. What has been hidden is brought to light." We hear "apocalypse" and think of the end times, and that's not entirely wrong. We are waiting for God to break through the heavens and do something grand, fix all the wrongs, bring down the mighty and raise up the poor. But, says Mathonet Vanderwell, it's hard to stand on tip toe for two thousand years.

So he refers to the Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber who's tried to normalize the word "apocalypse" as simply meaning "disclosure." Not just for the end time, but any time something is brought to light in society, or within us.

So the MeToo movement is an apocalypse. The surprise outcome of a vote is an apocalypse. A kid running away from home is an apocalypse.

And any time we do something or say something, and feel that twinge of our conscience, that immediate stab of regret or discomfort, I think that's an apocalypse. A moment that reveals to us the nastiness we're capable of, an experience of immediate judgment that says, "this is not who you are meant to be."

I titled this sermon "Be careful what you wish for." Israel wished for justice, and they got a heaping dose of it. But that, exactly that, is what we should wish for. We should stand on tip toe. We should expect, we should long for God to break through the heavens and unveil in us that which is not good and pleasing and holy and true, that he might, as the great hymn says, "take away the love of sinning." We should hope that in his judgment, through the work of the Spirit, God would summon forth in us lives of holiness and gratitude, lives that delight in following Christ in goodness and in truth.

Would you pray with me?

And so, Lord God, reveal to us that which in us is displeasing to you. Help us to repent of those things, to turn away from our sin, to surrender our lives to your refining fire.

As you strip away our impurities, reveal, more and more, who you created us to be – children of God, image bearers of the holy one.

Thank you, God, that you love us enough to stick with us, not giving up on us, but calling us back again and again and again.

May we receive your love with gladness.

We pray this in Jesus' name,

Amen.