

The Presentation of our Lord
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
February 2, 2019

Malachi 3:1-4 Psalm 84 Hebrews 2:14-18 Luke 2:22-40

Malachi, whose name means “my messenger,” is all about bringing God’s word to the people of Israel. The book consists of a series of questions from Israel to God. After the time of the book of Malachi, the voices of the prophets go silent for four hundred years. Malachi’s words, like other prophets’ words, are not easy to hear. They are about judgment and amending our ways. There is a sense in the words that God is tired of hearing the people complain. Why are the Israelites complaining? It is about 2000 years after God made a covenant with Abraham, and the covenant has not been filled completely. The promised land has not seen peace. The long-promised and awaited Messiah has not come. The people had lost hope and continually ask “where is the God of justice?” It seems that God favors the wicked while the righteous suffer. We ask the same questions today. When and where is justice? Malachi brings us God’s answer, jarring in its forthrightness.

The state of the people is this: their worship was mere form and not of the heart; “they no longer took the law seriously: tithes were ignored, the Sabbath was broken, intermarriage with pagans was common, and the priests were corrupt.” (Stan Mast, https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/advent-2c/?type=old_testament_lectionary)

God is coming, Malachi writes, and God’s arrival will not be what you imagine. God will come suddenly, unexpectedly, but, as we are experiencing, not immediately. Devoid of hope, we expect a gentle God; Malachi is informing us that God’s visitation may not be what we are expecting. We want God to take care of us and to destroy our enemies. Instead, God will examine and purify **us**. Our cleansing will not be easy; rather, it will be like a refiner’s fire that burns impurities out of fine gold and silver. Purification by fire and burning wash-day chemicals is not at all what we had in mind.

We are not ready for such an examination, and God knows this. The next prophetic voice that we hear, however, is that of John the baptizer, and he also tells us to repent. Repent and return to the Lord! His words may be softer, but his message, at its heart, is not. There is another one coming, and we are all unworthy in his sight.

The one coming, the Messiah, of course, is Jesus. Jesus’ parents present him at the Temple in accordance with Jewish law. In a somewhat similar way, we present ourselves (or others present us) for baptism in the church. Jesus’ presentation,

however, is God incarnate; he has come, as it is written in the book of Hebrews, “to destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.” Jesus has come to destroy evil and to crush eternal death; in Jesus, we live. This is the Jesus presented in the Temple. He does not have to be cleansed; we do. And we cannot bear to be cleansed by fire; it is only Jesus who can endure the purifying fire, the sword that pierces his flesh. We do not face the world – or ourselves – alone. As Simeon took the child Jesus into his arms, so God, through Jesus, takes us into God’s arms. We are held by light and glory – by Love itself. We are branded in baptism as God’s own. God will never leave us, even when we leave God. The use of the word “branded” is intentional. We are not washed gently in baptism, but die and are raised to new life with and in Christ. When we are handed to the celebrant we are being given to God. So it is when we present ourselves; we come to be branded by the waters and oil of baptism.

Branded and claimed, with our consent, the same Holy Spirit that rested on Simeon and rested on Jesus and now rests on us. We are still in the arms of a loving God. The world can do nothing that God will not overcome. The prophets and saints of the past, and those yet to come praise and glorify God. We are invited to join those voices in all that we do and all that we are. Beloved children, the covenant has not been broken; it is in the process of its fulfillment. Until Jesus comes again, keep turning to the Lord who loves you, holds you, and brings abundant life. Give thanks for the prophets who tell us the truth no matter how hard it is to hear. God who loves you completely, claims us still. Thanks be to God!