

Where is the God of Justice, 2nd Sunday of Advent

Malachi 2:17-3:4

Prayer: Father, this Advent season, we come before you, we come to your word, asking for the return of Jesus, our Savior, to make all things new. We find ourselves in a similar position as the Israelite people; we are often tired of the injustice that plagues our world, that bad people seem to get away with anything, while others suffer. We are tired of disease that puts loved ones in the hospital or worse, the grave. We are tired of our own sinfulness that seems to haunt us, even when we have the best intentions and yet, seem to struggle, just to break free from sin's enslaving effects. And Father, at times we just feel complacent. We want to be with you. I pray that you will let us feel the zeal for the Lord that you deserve until Jesus returns. Remind us that our Savior is coming back and remind our hearts not to lose hope. It is in Jesus name, I pray, Amen.

Intro: The Advent season is in swing, we've had our church wide Advent party, ate a ton of Bacon. We're working through our Advent devotionals; we're lighting candles at home. If it hasn't happened, you'll have a ton of Christmas parties that pop up on your calendar, there will be a scramble to pick up all the presents you need for your fourth cousins third aunt and make sure that the Christmas lights are properly attached to the side of your house and synced to flash along with the Christmas radio station. That or you're like me, and you live near that guy and have just to give up leaving my house at a certain time of night.

But in all this busyness, we can forget the entire purpose of the Advent and Christmas seasons in church history. Historically, Christians have used this time of year to remind themselves that all is not well with the world. They reminded their hearts that they were in an

in-between time, between when Jesus first came to defeat Satan, Sin, and Death at the cross, and the time when war finally ended. And in the meantime, they might face persecution, they still struggle with sin, they will face sickness and brokenness, and their hearts will sometimes grow cold until Jesus comes back. And those earlier Christians could, while reading their Bibles find a similar time in history, namely, that period of time that Old Testament Israel spent looking forward to Jesus' first coming, the period of time when they longed for God to dwell with them and send his Messiah and make all the bad things good again. During this Advent season, here at Redeemer, what we want to do is to spend some time looking at Old Testament passages where we see a God's people crying out for God to send a Messiah, his Anointed one, and where God gives those people some hint at what this Messiah's coming will look like.

The Cry

And so here we are, in the book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, the last time that God speaks to his people through a prophet for 400 some odd years before Jesus comes. A few other history books, like Chronicles, will be written, but this is the last time a prophet speaks to the people on behalf of God in this precise way. But the Israelites are here, about 60-70 years after being to return to the Promised Land after having been dragged off to Babylon, they have rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, and they have rebuilt the temple of God, and they find themselves wondering, okay, now that we've done that, where is God? Why hasn't he shown up yet?

And as time goes on, these folks grow complacent. They don't have the zeal their fathers and grandfathers did when they rebuilt Jerusalem and the Temple. They don't have the same love of God and desire for his holiness. The people have grown complacent. Throughout

the book of Malachi, they are indicted by God for their complacency, bringing half-hearted sacrifices to the temple, maimed sheep instead of the whole male lambs they are to bring (Mal 1:14) or chasing after foreign idols (Mal 2:11), or neglecting those in their community who are most vulnerable, orphans, widows, hired workers, and foreigners in their land.

If you're like me, you've struggled at times with complacency. With giving God your best. And I'm not just talking about financial gifts; that would be included, but I think for us, that can be the easy out sometimes; just throw money at a problem. We struggle to give God our effort and our time. We treat the faith as something to be consumed when it is convenient for us, rather than the grateful sacrifice back to God, that Romans 12:1 says our lives are to serve as. We content to let other people serve our kids or our communion or lead our Community Groups rather than asking, "How can I honor God with all that he has given me?"

And in the middle of their faithlessness and their own injustice, Malachi 2:17 the Israelites have the gall to ask God, "Where are you? Where is this God of justice we hear so much about." The Lord tells them through his prophet, Malachi, that he is wearied, worn out by their hypocrisy. Where is God? Where are they? They are acting like atheists. At best they believe God is some sort of absentee landlord and while they are disobeying God, twisting his word, saying that "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them," they wonder where he is to deal with those "jerks over there" who give them a hard time. Anyone who tries to disprove God so that they can be freed from his rightful claim of authority, by asking where God is when bad things happen is falling into this trap.

How often do we do that? Wonder where God is, but we've treated him like he's there to serve us. To do what we want for us and then to validate our own sinful decisions. And then

we wonder why he doesn't seem to be around. We don't really take God as seriously as we should, and God would be in his rights to indict us for that hypocrisy. So we have our problem: Despite having a new temple and being returned to their land, God's people still don't follow him full-heartedly, they are the same sinful people they were before, and they accuse God of inactivity. "Where is the God of justice?"

The Promise

It should be noted that God is not required to provide a response. He doesn't owe us an explanation. It is grace that he does so. Israel is in a very similar position to Job. Job was a man who lost everything he had, and begin to question God and his justice and then...God speaks. He doesn't explain why what happened to Job happened to Job; he just reminds Job that Job is not God. When God get done talking to Job, all Job can say, basically is Job 42:3

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

Israel doesn't know what they're asking for.

Here, God graciously kneels down to Israel, and he says, in Malachi 3:1 **Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?**¹

In other words, God is saying, look, you question my justice, you question my presence. Well, fine, I am coming and here's what that will look like. First, I'm sending a messenger, a forerunner. His job is to prepare the people to receive this coming Lord, who is going to show

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mal 3:1–2.

up to the temple that is currently being treated with half-hearted religion at best, contempt at worst. This Lord will be the messenger of the covenant, that is the treaty that exists between God and his people laid out in the book of Deuteronomy primarily, and he is coming to see if the people have been obeying that covenant. Now, this verse says this is the covenant in which the people delight. But this is God being sarcastic.² The people don't delight in God's law; they are not prepared for the Messenger of the Covenant to show up. The people ask, "Where is this God of Justice?" God turns back to them and asks, "Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can endure the God of Justice?" The implied answer is, of course, no one. No one, as Psalm 14:3 reminds us, is good. No one is righteous. And when the Messenger comes, God says through Malachi 3:3-4, **"For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years."** He's cleaning house. This old corruption, God says, will not be tolerated, and even the priestly caste will have to be purified to restore to Judah and Jerusalem, the center of Old Testament Jewish life, to a place where the Lord can be pleased.

Now when Israel first gets this message, these are dark words, heavy words. God is not happy with the way they have been behaving toward him and toward each other. And fundamentally we are in no better shape than the Israelites. Paul David Tripp wrote in his Advent devotional, that **"You can run from a bad relationship, you can quit a bad job, you can**

² Joyce G. Baldwin, [*Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 28, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 265.

move from a dangerous neighborhood, and you can leave a dysfunctional church, but you have no ability whatsoever to escape yourself. You and I simply have no ability to rescue ourselves from the greatest danger in our lives, [sin]." Our complacency toward God and our outright rebellion against God come from a heart of sin and God is not pleased with what he finds.

As Christians though, we read this passage of God righting these wrongs, we don't shudder the way the first Israelites to hear this might have. Why is that? What about the Messenger of the Covenant's arrival has so pivoted history that we, looking back at Malachi 2:17-3:4 see Good News? What happened?

The Fulfillment

Jesus happened. The first chapter of the Book of Mark, written 400 year later, explains this passage in Malachi by combining this passage with Isaiah 40:3 and writing, **"Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness; 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"** John the Baptist appears as the messenger who comes before the Lord, baptizing people for the forgiveness of sin, for treating God with complacency or outright hatred, calling them to repent of sin, warning them that God's Messenger of the Covenant is coming, and then when the time is right, Jesus shows up. John baptizes him, even though Jesus has no sin. This is a sign of things to come. The Messenger of the Covenant who comes from God to bring justice to sinners for the sin takes on to himself the just punishment for our sins. He purifies us with the baptism of the Holy Spirit, sanctifying us, cleansing us, so that we too might be holy as he is holy. The question God asks, Who can endure the day of his coming? The answer is no one, at least no human being. But the

messenger of the Covenant, Jesus comes to endure the day on our behalf, if we will give ourselves over to him. Only because Jesus is the Lord who wrote the covenant, can he withstand the covenant and only because Jesus is human can he withstand the covenant for us, on our behalf. It is profoundly good news that Jesus, as the God of justice incarnate, in human flesh, has come into our world to answer the Israelites question.

But let's acknowledge something here. The God of justice has come, Jesus has come, he has withstood the obligations of the covenant, obeying completely in a way that neither we nor the Israelites were able to, and yet was punished for us. The God of justice has come, but we still find injustice in our world, do we not? We were talking in our Community Group a few weeks ago, and I said that Jesus had come to win the victory over Satan, Sin, and Death, and to establish his kingdom. One of the ladies looked at me and said, "Well, this isn't that great of a kingdom?" Bad stuff still happens. Fires wipe out chunks of California; kids get sick, people treat each other unjustly. If Jesus has established his kingdom, why can we still find ourselves asking, "Where is the God of justice?" Why do we still struggle with sin in our own hearts?

It's this very tension that Christians who started celebrating Advent weighed in their own hearts. They saw themselves as a sort of New Israel, especially in this sense: to Old Israel, God had promised the Messenger of the Covenant, Jesus was coming. To New Israel, God has promised us that Jesus is coming back. Jesus' work in paying for our sins on the cross, and defeating death has been completed. But Jesus' work in building his kingdom isn't quite done yet. He will come back to fully bring justice to those who are brokenhearted, to salve the wounds of those who hurt, and to punish sin for those who have not sought him for forgiveness.

The call for us then is to keep that in mind. For the believer, Jesus' future return is a profound source of hope and comfort. It's good news. Our sin is paid for. Jesus is changing our desires so that we love him and we love his covenant, his law to a greater degree. He is sanctifying us so that we will be more like him. He is building his kingdom slowly, and one day, the book of Revelation tells us, he will wipe away every tear.

But for person who doesn't love and worship Jesus, who rejects his authority, or for the person who hides behind a guise of complacent religion without letting him be our proper Lord, Jesus' return will be bad news. The idea that the God of justice isn't finished yet, should make us uncomfortable and we will either plug our ears and try not to hear it, or it serve the same purpose for us that Malachi and John the Baptist served for Israel; it will call us to repentance of our sin and putting our trust in him fully. I know that in this room there are people who love Jesus. I also know that in this room, there are people who treat Jesus with the same sort of half-hearted devotion that the Israelites in Malachi often gave to God. While you have breath, though, there is the opportunity to turn from that boredom or complacency. You can turn to a sincere hope in Jesus. Justice can be a good thing to hope for, rather than a bad thing.

Redeemer, may we be a people who see Jesus coming as good news because the God of justice has come. He has come to cleanse to endure the day of his own justice on our behalf, and because he is purifying us as well! May this Advent season spur us to hope in his return when he will finish that which he began during his first kingdom and give to us a kingdom where tears are wiped away, and there is no more injustice toward each other. May that be a hope that settles deep into our hearts during this season.

1. What areas of life might cause you to wonder, "Where is the God of justice?"

2. God turned around and convicted the Israelites of their complacency toward God and their evil toward each other. Where has God convicted you of complacency or evil toward others?

3. How does Jesus prove God's justice and deal with your evil or complacency?

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