



Holy Disruption: Ancient Prophets for Modern Times—Malachi
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; August 30, 2026
 Malachi 3:1-18

Next week marks the end of our sermon series, *Holy Disruption: Ancient Prophets for Modern Times*. Along the way, we've listened to some old voices—and we have discovered how remarkably contemporary they sound. Isaiah called us to wake up and see the world differently, to recognize God's presence even in times of upheaval and uncertainty. Amos reminded us that worship means little if it doesn't lead toward justice. Hosea showed us a God whose love refuses to give up on us, even when we wander far from God. Micah stripped faith down to its essentials: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Jeremiah spoke to people living through exile and loss and reminded them to seek the good of the place where God had planted them. Ezekiel stood among dry bones and dared to imagine that God could bring life where everyone else saw only death. Zechariah reminded us not to despise small beginnings, because God's work often comes not through power or might, but through the quiet movement of God's Spirit. Habakkuk gave us permission to cry out, "How long?"—to bring our anger and grief to God

without pretending that everything is all right. And Joel reminded us that even after devastation, God is still capable of providing abundance, restoration, and new life.

Nine prophets. Nine ancient voices who have given us permission to ask questions like: What do we do when the world feels unjust? How do we keep the faith when communities and institutions are struggling? How do we love when we are divided? How do we hold onto hope when the future feels uncertain? And where is God when there's so much that feels broken? The prophets do not offer easy answers. They disrupt our assumptions. They challenge our complacency. They remind us that faith isn't about escaping the world as it is, but about learning to see the world as God sees it—and then daring to live accordingly. Now let us consider the prophet Malachi.

There's often a passion that comes with being the first generation to experience something new. But as that experience is passed from one generation to the next, the fire can begin to fade. What was once precious can become familiar, and what was once deeply meaningful can become routine. Something like this had happened among the Jews who returned from captivity in Babylon. When Malachi wrote, around 430 BCE, much restoration had already happened. The Temple had been rebuilt, sacrifices had resumed, and Jerusalem's walls had been repaired. The wounds of exile had, at least on the surface, begun to heal. But a generation or two had passed, and the hard lessons of captivity were fading from memory. The priests had grown corrupt. The people had grown hard-hearted and cynical. Men were divorcing their wives, tithes were being withheld, and the people had even begun to accuse God of injustice. The faith that had once sustained their ancestors had become something they could take or leave.¹ So, God raises up Malachi—not necessarily to scold the people, but to call them home—to invite them to remember who they are, whose they are, and what it means to live once again in a faithful relationship with God.

Malachi's prophecy offers us several important themes for the life of faith. First, an awareness that when we remember that we are beloved by God, we become more capable of loving others. Second, spiritual leadership, at its best, is a ministry of pointing beyond ourselves toward the One who gives us life. Third, Malachi reminds us of the importance of repentance when our faith has grown cold or when we've wandered from the path God intends for us. Repentance may seem like a foreign concept in our postmodern culture, but repentance isn't about shame; it's about turning around and finding our way back home to God. Fourth, Malachi reminds us of the gift of encouragement. He writes, "Those who revered the Lord spoke with one another." They gathered together, talked with one another, and encouraged one another. Saints who are growing in their faith bless one another with words of grace, affirmation, wisdom, and hope. And finally, Malachi reminds us of the quiet practices that sustain a faithful life when he tells us that those who revered the Lord "thought on God's name." In other words, they pondered who God is, what God has done, and what God has promised. Like spiritual manna, contemplation of God's character and faithfulness refreshes the heart.

In the Book of Malachi, there's a point when the people question, "Where is the God of justice?" Rather than offering an explanation, God offers a promise: I am coming. "I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me." But what happens when God comes? Malachi gives us an answer that may be a little unsettling for God comes not simply to comfort us but to refine us. Then, says the Lord:

"I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts."

It's striking what Malachi chooses to name. God is concerned about workers who are treated unjustly. God is concerned about widows and orphans—the vulnerable and easily overlooked. God is concerned about the stranger, the outsider, the one who can so easily be pushed to the margins. In essence, the God who calls us to repentance is also deeply concerned with the way we live together—with how we use whatever power we have and with the way we treat those who have less of it. That is a word worth hearing in every generation, because every generation has its own ways of deciding whose lives matter, whose voices deserve to be heard, and who can safely be pushed aside.

Malachi will not allow us to separate our love of God from our life together. The spiritual life is never merely private. How we treat one another becomes a reflection of what we believe about God. And I wonder if that's why Malachi places this warning alongside his call to repentance. The question is not simply, "Have I been a good person?" The question is, "Have I allowed my heart to be changed?" because to "fear the Lord" in Malachi's understanding, is to allow our hearts to be shaped by the holy love of God.

When we remember who God is, we begin to see one another differently. Perhaps that is part of what it means to prepare the way for the God who is coming—a promise that appears again at the very end of Malachi:

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.ⁱⁱ

With these words, the Old Testament comes to a close. What a way to end the story. Not neat and tidy. Not with injustice defeated. Not with the people restored to perfect faithfulness. But with a promise. God isn't finished. God is still coming. And before that great day arrives, God will send a messenger to prepare the way.

Then the pages of Scripture turn silent. For more than four hundred years, there is no prophet like Malachi. Generations come and go; kingdoms rise and fall; the people wait. The waiting continues until out of the wilderness comes a strange, rugged preacher named John. He wears camel's hair, eats locusts and wild honey, and sounds remarkably like the prophets who came before him. The ancient promise of Malachi unfolds through the preaching of John and the appearance of God—embodied among us.

While Malachi leaves us waiting, the gospels tell us what—and whom—we're waiting for. And what arrives is not another curse, but the hope of a new way of living, a new way of loving, a new life in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, we meet the God who comes—not with a sword, but with love; not to abandon a broken world, but to enter it; not to condemn us to our old ways, but to call us into abundant life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Bruce Demarest, Commentary on Malachi in *The Life with God Bible*, NRSV.

ⁱⁱ Malachi 4:5-6.

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