

Advent is the season of waiting. Advent means “coming,” and when something or someone is coming, you have to wait. There is perhaps no other book of the Bible that embodies this than the Book of Malachi. It is the final book of prophecy, the final revelation from God to His people until over four hundred years later when the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah to announce the birth of a son, John the Baptist, to him and his aged wife Elizabeth. With Malachi’s prophecy, God sought to comfort and encourage His people who would come over those next four centuries in that long wait. He also comforted and encouraged the people of the late fifth century BC, around the year 430, because they had been waiting, and like impatient children during these weeks, waiting and longing for Christmas to finally arrive, God’s people started not just to get a little naughty, they fell into outright disobedience and sin. They had been directed away from godly expectation and preparation into the moment of now, seeking immediate satisfaction.

The people of Judah had been allowed back home after seventy years in captivity in Babylon. Zerubbabel had led the rebuilding of the temple. Nehemiah had rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. In a Levite named Joshua, the office of high priest had been reestablished. Ezra had faithfully taught the people all the words of God in the Scriptures. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah had encouraged the people in their life and worship in the land of Judah.

But in the next generation, despite the earlier renewal, there was no golden age of prosperity. There was no renewed independence as their fathers had once enjoyed under the kings. God’s people were in their homeland, but it was now the Persian province of Yehud, under the administration of foreigners. God’s people grew comfortable in the world, began to prize that, and started to lose sight not just of God’s Word and will, but His promise to send the Messiah. It is to this people and time that Malachi was sent to proclaim God’s Word.

God begins speaking one of the simplest and clearest declarations of His love for His people Israel. He speaks not of David’s house, or Judah or Levi, no, He uses the name given to all of His people, the whole body of all those whom He has claimed for Himself. Who you are, what God has to say to you, begins first with His loving claim of you as His own beloved people. That is how He begins the Ten Commandments. Not just the stark command, “You shall have no other gods.” But with the introduction, **“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”** This is who I am, this is what I have done for you, and so this is the life I have for you, how I desire you to confess that reality in your life before Me and with one another.

God’s love for His people is unchanging, unshakeable. And when we would be foolish to ask, “Oh, really? How so?” **“How have You loved us?”** He directs us as He does through Malachi. See how He prospers His people throughout their history. To be sure, their lives are rarely easy and smooth sailing. But even when they must suffer the degradation of exile, here they are, returned, restored. And their enemies, Edom, their ancient foe, who delighted in Jerusalem’s destruction and sought to take advantage? They have been torn down, cast out from their land, never to return.

And how much more you, dear Christian? You have not been cast out from home and brought back from exile, no, you live on this side of the history of God’s own Son coming into our flesh, having flesh and bone just like yours, suffering and dying, and rising again. For more than playground bullies, overbearing

bosses, a spouse who wearies you with their sins and bad habits, even children who break your heart, He has exercised total judgment on your greatest enemies, and this because He loves you. All this is already seen in our Lord's holy birth.

*Dear Christian heart, Whoe'er thou art,
Be of good cheer and let no sorrow move thee!
For God's own Child, In mercy mild,
Joins thee to Him; how greatly God must love thee!*

It is with this reminder, this foundation, that as a gentle, loving father, God then proceeds to correct His people. He directs them away from thinking as the world thinks, from prizing what the nations treasure. He does this first by addressing the sins of the priests. The opening chapters of Leviticus give the instructions for the various sacrifices. Common to all of the animal sacrifices is that they were to be unblemished; not blind, sickly, weak, or deformed.

He reminds them that there in the temple, before the altar, is the Lord's own name and presence. The phrase Malachi uses in verse nine is unique in all the Old Testament: **“and now entreat the face of God.”** The closest phrase to this is what Jacob says after his vision of the ladder into heaven, where he exclaims that great mystery of all Christian worship: **“Surely the LORD is in this place...This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven”** (Gen 28:16b, 17b).

Even as God's people waited for Him to send the Messiah, the Lord was present with His people, dwelling in the place where His Word was proclaimed and the sacrifices delivered His forgiveness and blessing to His people. The very priests who served in this place, before the Lord's face, had higher regard for their Persian overlords, would never offer them a weak, sickly animal in tribute. But for the God of Gods, the almighty and eternal Lord, their Redeemer who brought them back to this land, for whom they waited to act in yet a more wonderful way? What they would not wish to keep for themselves, nor put before a guest or master, is what is offered to Him.

In chapter 2, the focus shifts to the priests' faulty teaching. For it is not the priests who bring the various animals on their own, these are the offerings of all the people. Why would they bring such unacceptable animals? Because they have not been taught rightly. The people as a whole are at fault for bringing the blemished animals. The priests are doubly at fault, first, for not teaching the people rightly in the first place, and second, for accepting and offering the animals that are brought.

Now what do such words, directed to Levitical priests, regarding service in the ancient temple and animal sacrifices have to do with us? God tells us. In chapter 1, verse 11, **“from the rising of the sun to its setting My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to My name, and a pure offering. For My name will be great among the nations.”** Malachi here prophesies of the worship of the New Testament, what is offered by all the members of the royal priesthood, the holy Church throughout the world, as the spiritual sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving.

While the priests of Malachi's day demonstrate their faithlessness by offering defiled animals upon the table of the Lord, Malachi foretells the pure offering of faith from all the nations. The temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, would all come to their fulfillment. But the worship of the Lord would not end. He would dwell among all the peoples of the earth, from east to west, in a way no less great than He dwelt in the temple. By His Word and Sacrament, He is in the midst of every gathering of His people, those

whom He loves. And from those who believe in Him is offered the pure sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. This is not, as so many of the prophets warn against, what we offer and bring in order to keep God happy. We hear in tonight's psalm, God's happiness does not depend on the sacrifice of animals, they are all His anyways. What He desires from us in a believing heart, that trusts in Him, that receives what He gives freely out of His love, and that responds in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving.

It is all that proceeds from faith that is a good and holy work in God's sight: prayers, confession of the faith, proclamation of the Gospel, offering ourselves and all that we have to God in service for His kingdom and in love toward our neighbor.

And so as you wait with all the church on earth for the Lord's final appearing, seek and treasure the true worship of the true God, where He causes His name to dwell, His face to shine, through His Word and Sacrament. This is where He creates true faith that lives on the receiving end of His love for us in Christ Jesus and His perfect, final sacrifice for our sins. This true faith is then active in holy living. It does not prize the treasures of this earth. It does not chase worldly wealth and comfort. It seeks out the pure teaching of the Word of God to learn and guard it. It flees to the table of the Lord, where He continues to offer forgiveness and blessing to His people.

This true faith, in joyful thanksgiving, offers the best to God. It drives us to live our lives with the recognition that we are always before God. The Christian is always aware of his impurities and imperfections. Our heart may have misgivings. Yet when we remember we are clothed by God out of love with His own Son's robe of righteousness, that He sees in us no impurities, no imperfections, no blemish, we go boldly to the throne of grace, and happily bring before Him all our offerings of faith.

Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!