

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Malachi 4:1–2, Psalm 98, 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13, Luke 21:5–19
Malachi: Lowly But Faithful

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

MALACHI

This morning's sermon is based on our First Lesson, from Malachi Chapter Four. I feel special affection for the prophet Malachi. It could be said of him what was said of Johannes Brahms, who labored under the great expectations that he would produce the next great symphony after Beethoven. Brahms famously said this:

You have no idea how it feels
to hear behind you
the footsteps
of a giant like Beethoven.¹

Many a composer could say that, I should think.

So it was with Malachi. He was a true prophet of God, yet he is called a “minor prophet” compared to the giants of the past — prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

But the times were bad. They were shallow times. And I guess it was hard to be a giant in such a mediocre age.

The great Bible scholar Gerhard von Rad describes the spiritual climate in which Malachi preached this way:

Unlike the pre-exilic prophets, however, the people with whom [the post-exilic prophets were] concerned were not outwardly arrogant: rather, they were men of little faith.²

What seems to have horrified Malachi was how *casually* people high and low were sinning. He was troubled, for example, by half-hearted sacrifices in the temple. So he complains about the second-string offerings to the Lord:

¹ http://www.chambermusicsociety.org/pressnews/beethovens_legacy, for example.

² Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Volume II* (Harper & Row: New York, 1960, English translation 1965), page 280.

⁸When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong? Try presenting that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 1:8-9, NRSV)

Likewise, he is troubled by the widespread divorce among the people. Malachi warns the people that the LORD will not accept their worship because they are not being true to the solemn marriage vows. But *the Lord* witnessed those vows, and how can anyone who takes the Lord seriously not tremble at the thought of abandoning those vows? But that is the problem with Malachi's age. It is not a serious age. It is not serious about God.

Because the LORD was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant...So take heed to yourselves, and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. ¹⁶For I hate divorce, says the LORD the God of Israel... (Malachi 2:14-16, RSV)

Like all prophets, Malachi was sensitive to evil in the land. He grieved about injustice and impiety like Jeremiah and the other great prophets, but it was his fate to preach in an age that committed no Promethean sins — no shaking of the fist toward God and defying the Lord — but was rather an age of spiritual boredom that could do the most outrageous things and hardly notice, hardly lose a minute of sleep over it.

I fear that this is true of our age. Our children are growing up in it. Fifty years ago, for example, you could find an occasional atheist who would shake his fist at heaven and say, "I just don't believe it!" And however much his pious neighbors might have disagreed with him, at least they thought he had said something remarkable.

But now the occasional atheist is *everywhere* and his or her views are accepted as respected science and morality. I mean, the most outrageous things are calmly taught as if they are the obvious truth — things that smoke of sorrow, of suicide and despair, murder and the loss of feel for how precious human life is. Those who reduce morality, beauty, and worship to a string of biochemical processes that happen to have some evolutionary advantage... these teachers are not considered mad men or insane women, but often sit calmly at the teacher's desk.

But our path is different, God willing. Our Catechism Class is starting up again soon, and as best I can we will be learning the old ways and the old paths. We will be learning that human life is of infinite worth, that we are made by

God in his image. We shall learn about the compassion, sympathy, honesty, and integrity asked of us by God. For we *believe* in God.

So did Malachi. He preached in an age when people seemed to yawn with boredom at preachers, but he preached nonetheless.

My wife, Carol, pointed out to me that probably the most important verse in this morning's Gospel Lesson is the one about witnessing. Jesus is talking about the end times, about earthquakes and famines and nations rising against nations, and signs in heaven and on earth, and persecutions of the Church, and prisons and dungeons. And then Jesus gives the practical lesson of this all:

¹³This will be a time for you to bear testimony. (Luke 21:13, RSV)

Well, this fine thing we can say about Malachi: he bore his testimony. He stood up in a spiritually lethargic age and said, "This is not right. We should return to the Lord."

And then, like all prophets, he also preached words of hope and encouragement to his people. This brings me at last to my text. My sermon this morning is based on the final verse of our First Lesson, from Malachi Chapter 4. The book Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament, and so this happy verse is just about the last thing the Old Testament has to say to us before the birth of Jesus, which is even happier.

²But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall. (Malachi 4:2, RSV)

This verse connects three ideas: (1) The fear of the Lord. (2) The sun of righteousness. (3) Going forth "leaping like calves from the stall." Our text is like a gem radiant with three faces, and it all begins with the first idea: the fear of the Lord.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

Sunday School teachers sometimes give memory verses to their children to learn. It can hold them in good stead throughout their lifetimes to know some verses by heart. If you would like a memory verse to take with you from this morning's sermon, let me propose this one — Proverbs 9:10:

¹⁰The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom...
(Proverbs 9:10, KJV)

I hope you will find some comfort in pondering the idea that this trait — the fear of the Lord — is not an especially high standard to reach.³ It might be hard for us to reach the lofty generosity of a saint, or the spiritual joy of a mystic, or the bravery of a martyr. It might be beyond us to accomplish perfection in our piety. But we can do this: we can fear the Lord. And if we do, our text makes us a great promise: that the sun of righteousness shall rise upon us.

For Lutherans, the phrase “fear the Lord” has an especially comforting sound because so many of us remember it from our Catechism days. How did Martin Luther begin his discussion of the Ten Commandments? By talking of fearing and loving the Lord. What does it mean, for example, to keep the Sabbath day holy? With his wonderful rhythm, repeating his theme for each of the Ten Commandments, Luther begins his answer by speaking of fearing the Lord:

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God’s Word, but instead keep that Word holy and gladly hear and learn it.

One simple lesson to learn from Luther here is that if you should ever wonder *how to go about* fearing and loving the Lord, then the Ten Commandments teach you about that. If you want to fear the Lord, then don’t go around worshiping idols, do not go around cussing, do not neglect church, honor your parents, and so on.

There are gradations in the fear of the Lord, and we should all hope for the higher forms of it. Sometimes we begin with fearing the *punishment* of the Lord. This is not to be despised. If we are kept from murder, for example, by the fear of hell, then good! It might be a beginning form of fearing the Lord, but it is a good one.

But there is a higher form of fearing the Lord that is akin to loving the Lord. In this sense, the fear of the Lord amounts to a feeling of reverence for the Lord and a sincere desire to not let him down, nor to repay his generosity with sin. Especially when we ponder the life and sacrificial death of Jesus, it is a lovely thing that we should fear to disappoint the One who has done so much for us.

Wherever we are on the gradations of fearing the Lord, it is good to be *somewhere*. All forms of fearing the Lord at least involve being mindful of the Lord. If we fear the Lord, we do not sit around in his universe like a bump on the log, indifferent to our place in his world. To fear the Lord means that at least we are willing to take him into account, and that is a good thing.

³ An idea pointed out by Spurgeon in his sermon “The Rising Sun.”

THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Indeed, Malachi says that it is more than a good thing. It is a stance of the soul upon which the Lord smiles. As our text says:

²But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.

Now, an interesting thing about this promise is that it suggests that even those who fear the Lord are in need of some sunshine in their lives and in need of some healing. That's why the promise is so important. If we were always bathed in sunshine and always well, we would not need the sun of righteousness to rise on us. But we are not there yet, are we?

When the Twenty-third Psalm speaks of walking through the "valley of the shadow of death," that's because living in the shadows can befall even the believer. When Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, it was night time. His closest disciples could not stay awake and pray for him. They were struggling that night in darkness. Likewise, you might be going through a tough stretch of life now, with dark clouds of sickness or unemployment or loneliness or vague feel of uncertainty besetting you. If so, the promise of our text will probably sound good to you, and I hope it comes to you soon, that the "sun of righteousness" rises upon you, with healing in his wings.

What a great transition it is, from darkness to sunlight! Carol and I seem to wake up earlier and earlier, eager for the day to begin. Let's put on the coffee. Let's look for the dawn.

...weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. (Psalm 30:5, KJV)

Good things seem to happen when the sun rises. The birds begin to sing, the sunflowers begin to track the sun (at least in some stage of their development), energy for the day is renewed. It is a great thing to see the sunshine of a new day. I am especially mindful of this as I get older.

The great thing for the church about this promise of the sun rising is that we know this righteousness sun: He is our Lord Jesus. He is the very light of our life and our hope of passing on some spiritual light in our world.

THE LEAPING CALVES

Finally, let me speak of those calves — those calves who come leaping from their stall. They have been cooped up all night, but they are like all God's

young creatures: they are bursting with energy. So, the sun rises, the farmer opens the stall, and off they go! They go leaping out into the meadow.

I love this image of energy. This too is a promise to those who fear the Lord: not only will the sun of righteousness rise upon them, replacing their darkness with light, but also their energy will be renewed. You young folks in the congregation might not have much of a feel for this yet, and that is a blessing. But for people who are struggling with sickness or depression or simply the accumulation of years, it is a great thing to imagine leaping again like a calf released from the stall.

The world, I say, is better than it looks. Renew your devotion to Jesus. He is your Master and your Saviour, and he means to shine on you. To him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.