

## ***“Thanksgiving for Returning”***

(Malachi 2:17-3:1-7)

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. The sermon is entitled, “Thanksgiving for returning,” but God’s words to us, “*return* to Me,” don’t occur until the very end of our reading. There are many other words leading up to that and we need them, because without the context we can’t know what this Advent gift of “returning” is all about. In fact it’s the words leading up to “returning” – another way of saying “repentance” – that Malachi by inspiration of the Holy Spirit masterfully uses to explain and break down what “returning” to God is all about.

This portion of God’s Word is absolutely invaluable. Never underestimate the value of the Old Testament and for that matter the Minor Prophets that don’t get the press that the more popular books of the Bible get. We are blessed to be able to receive God’s Word from Malachi this evening. His name means “my messenger” and in our text tonight he has plenty to say about messengers...we need to know about them, esp. the main One to know about *returning* to God.

First of all, Malachi 2:17 describes what was going on in the hearts of God’s people at the time. They were discontent and murmuring; they were losing – or had already lost – their faith. They were tired of waiting for things to get better. Malachi tells us what they were saying (and yes, their discontentment had gotten really serious). They said: “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.” and “Where is the God of justice?” They said these things because as far as what they could observe with their eyes, unbelieving people living for themselves and their own pleasure were prospering, but as for the faithful, they were suffering.

People dedicated to idolatry, greed, immorality, evil, lust, and power, *these* people were advancing in life. These people were getting stronger, but those who stood for the truth, for love, forgiveness, and true faith in God, *these* people often wound up with the short-end of the stick and so again, they murmured, they complained. And what happens when all we do is complain? We complain and complain, our skepticism and pessimism starts to take over our minds, our hearts, our thoughts, our words, and before we know it, our faith is *gone*!

I often remind my son Bryan, “Athletes will play like they practice.” The athlete who trains hard will play hard; the athlete who exudes intensity and precision in practice, will do so in the games. In drama, you must conduct “dress rehearsals”...you are aiming to do just as you will do for the “real” performance. If we call ourselves Christians, we don’t wait for church on Sunday mornings to “act like Christians,” we seek to live in the faith 24/7, when we feel like it and when we don’t, when it seems easier and when it seems very hard. So in those “moments” if we allow ourselves to spew frustration, anger, judgment, hardness...our “practice” might just turn into what we are. We already know that sinning -- whether it flows through our eyes, our mouths, our hands, etc. -- comes from within, it comes from our hearts. We live in accord with

what we are. Yes, Christians are sinners, but they do not claim allegiance to it. They do not follow it. They do not permit it to become their master so that they play, “follow the leader” with sin. As sinners we do sin, but we also despair of it, and more than anything – when it comes to sin – we want it to be washed away; we want it outta here!

Well the people of God in Malachi had harbored in their hearts so long and so hard their pessimism, their frustration: nothing was seeming to get any better! Look at how our problems only seem to get worse! What of our observations today? Is our national debt less? Less??? Are you kidding me? It continues to climb! Are we closer to solving the threat of terrorism? Are the threats increasing or decreasing? And what about immorality? Is it finally trending down? Are you kidding me? Not only is it not in a downtrend, but it is more and more approved of! So some ask in the face of these things: where is God? Maybe, He approves...maybe, He doesn't care...maybe Deists and Agnostics have a case. Why am I being so stupid as to wait for the Lord's coming? Maybe the skeptics and atheists are right, maybe I am a fool to hold to the Christian faith!

Malachi's time – about 430 years before Christ – mirrors our time and centuries *after* Malachi, St. Peter warned about the scoffers (they never go away; and indeed by virtue of our sinful nature, we have one whose taken up residence within each of us): 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 3:3-4: “knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. <sup>4</sup>They will say, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.’”

And dear Christians, the moment this mindset settles in the heart, then watch out, because that is the moment when we start to permit ourselves to serve sin. You know the saying, “when the cat is away, the mouse comes out to play,”...that's when we permit ourselves to believe that God isn't coming – or more to the point, that God isn't here – so who cares how we live? What difference does it make? I'll just do whatever I feel like doing. Disaster!

Malachi teaches and prophecies about two comings of the Lord: the first coming that we will soon celebrate this Christmas; and the second coming when this same Jesus will come in glory to judge the living and the dead. Think about it: how many years did the Old Testament people of God wait for Messiah to come? If you were living in Abraham's time, then you had to wait for 2000 years! But He came! Some skeptics will continue to complain, “But why so long?” Easy answer: “Because God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:4) God is patient, so that more and more people would come to saving faith instead of perishing without saving faith! Malachi records God's Word! The Father declared, “Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me.” (1:1a). This is a prophecy regarding John the Baptist who came to prepare the way for the Lord (just like the prophecy describes). And the wise ones, the faithful ones never gave up their faith; they never stopped waiting and they never stopped living for God! They never stopped resisting their flesh that said, “Stop waiting already and follow sin!” Instead – over and over again – they turned away from sin and RETURNED to God!

On the heels of the first messenger was the main and saving messenger: the Lord Jesus Christ. Malachi began to prophecy of Jesus: "And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple..." Augustine says that His temple was His body (ACC OT XIV 299)...this is a reference to the Incarnation, God taking on flesh; but perhaps it is good to be reminded that just as Malachi was writing to the whole Church, that Malachi is saying that when the Messenger Messiah Jesus comes He will come for His body the Church...for you and for me...His Temple, His Church, His People, The Royal Priesthood, His Living Stones that Make up THE building of God! You are His Temple...He came for you!

But He will come again. Again, Malachi describes both comings and when He comes again in glory (in His second coming that we are waiting for today), He will come to judge all people. How will we endure? How will we poor sinners stand? We will stand by virtue of His causing us to RETURN to Him through HIS work in our lives...His work in your life by grace through faith in Him! This saving and ongoing work of Jesus is what causes you to RETURN to God so that He will in mercy – even on the last day – return to you in grace, in love and mercy! But how do we know His work in our lives that makes us RETURN to God? We know through His cleansing work in us today. Through Holy Baptism and Holy Communion the Lord – the saving Messenger of God – works in us so that faith is not overrun by complaining. Instead, as He works in us, He effects a very different experience: we learn to become more aware of sin; and we become more familiar with the pain it causes, so that we hate it, confess it, and turn from it...all the while it is the work of Jesus that is taking place. This work causes us to daily RETURN to Him!

This work of God for repentance in you and me is presented in a magnificent way in Malachi: "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap." <sup>3</sup>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." Luther: "Christ is not merely the Purifier but also the purifying Agent. He is not only the Blacksmith but also the Fire; not only the Creator but also the Soap." (AE 18:410) As you know, fire purifies metals, and fullers' soap makes white. This soap contains alkali "which eats deep into the tissues. And this fire burns, [it] consumes what the sinner so dearly loves." (Laetsch, *The Minor Prophets*, 535) This is a severe process, the fuller, washer and cleaner kneads, massages the clothes by treading and trampling them. (Ibid., 534)

We need this work of Jesus upon us. It makes us become aware of our sin and our need for Him to wash us. David at Psalm 51:2 says simply: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!" and He prays to God to "purge me...wash me" (v 7). We need this. Otherwise, we will only complain and our faith will be lost and we will reject God, never RETURNING to Him. You are the "sons of Levi" Christians, you are the ones daily refined and washed by your Savior! As a result – having already been cleansed of your sin through the blood of Jesus which washes you; and His Gospel which refines you – you bring offerings to God in righteousness. You are holy priests made holy in Jesus. His life is your life; His righteousness is your righteousness! As St. Peter says, "you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a

spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:5)

“The Hebrew...for ‘refiner’ and ‘purifier’ describes His work as going on continually throughout the believer’s life. This is necessary, since the believer’s flesh ceaselessly battles against the new spiritual life. Daily the Refiner purges away the dross and takes away all tin. Even if this tin may seem like precious silver to the believer, it remains tin. No matter how highly polished, it is worthless dross, and as such is removed by the Purifier, the Searcher of hearts. Though painful it is a necessary, a blessed work, for which the believer will in time and eternity thank his Refiner, made of God unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).” (Laetsch, *The Minor Prophets*, 535-536)

And on account of His cleaning and refining work, given to us through Word and Sacrament, and experienced in us through RETURNING to God and turning from sin, we are made ready for His coming! This RETURNING delights to take God more seriously than anything in our lives. We are not like those who do not return to God and who “do not fear [Him]”. (v 5) The source of all sin is the lack of the fear of the Lord. (Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary, Old Testament Vol. II*, 723) Disregarding God, losing all fear of the One who judges every man makes us susceptible to any sin taking us over.

But what truly motivates us to hold to the Lord? It is not any threat from God that would cause us to melt in despair, but His love for us. Malachi records the Lord’s words to you this night Christian: “For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.” Because the Lord does not change – as we know Him in Jesus – His love for you does not change, His mercy for you does not change. God’s grace is not a fickle attribute of God. It is solid, stable, 100% reliable, totally guaranteed. Why? Because the Lord – as we know Him in Jesus – does not change. And “His grace makes it possible that [our] sorrow will become a godly sorrow working repentance unto salvation...” (Laetsch, 537)

This is what it means to RETURN to the Lord. We know He does not change, His mercy is new to us every morning and in this light, it is our true desire to turn from the complaining of unbelief that kills faith; instead we RETURN to the Lord. Turning from sin that only destroys, no matter the world’s deception and lack of patience, and we gladly RETURN to the Lord. This is how the Lord keeps us ready. RETURNING to Him day in and day out as He refines us, and as He washes us.

The church father Cyprian wrote: “And while God is provoked with frequent and continual offenses, he softens his indignation, and in his patience waits for the day of retribution, once for all determined. And although he has revenge in his power, he prefers to keep patience for a long while. [He bears], that is to say, mercifully, and puts off, so that, if it might be possible, the long-protracted mischief may at some time be changed, and humanity, involved in the contagion of errors and crimes, may even though late be converted to God, as he himself warns and says, ‘I do not will the death of him that dies, so much as that he may return and live.’ [Ezek 18:32] And again, ‘Return unto me,’ says the Lord.” (ACC OT XIV 304) And

by His Word and by His grace, we do. We have RETURNED again. You have RETURNED and have thanksgiving for RETURNING!