



SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, December 7, 2008

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Lection - Malachi 3:1-4 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. (v. 2) But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; (v. 3) he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. (v. 4) Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

I. Description of Liturgical Moment

This is the second Sunday of Advent, the time of year when our attention turns to the coming arrival of the glorious Lord, our Savior Jesus Christ. Often, however, we tend to think of Advent as a time marking the imminent Christmas moment, the time we set aside to celebrate Christ's birth with riches and pageantry.

This commercialized approach to Advent is wholly opposite to the narratives concerning this time as written about in Luke and Matthew's Gospels. Advent is also a time to realize that our Savior has come and is coming again. Thus, following the life of Jesus can motivate us to live not just for a single, overly commercialized day in a year where Christ is far too often absent from our thoughts, but to remember that he is also the soon-coming Christ who will set all things in order when he comes. As such, the season of Advent places our faith front and center: we are called to acknowledge and celebrate the birth of Christ, embrace the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and look forward to his expectant return.

II. Biblical Interpretations for Preaching and Worship: Malachi 3:1-4

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I remember the first time I paid real attention to the book of Malachi. Though I had heard sermons preached from this text during Advent, and though I remember it referenced in relationship to New Testament passages, it wasn't until I heard the evangelist Josh McDowell speaking from this text one spring break in Daytona Beach, Florida that I began to pay serious attention to it. I still remember that he referred to it as the only book written by a non-Jew, the book of Malachi, the Italian prophet. The joke went over well and the humor made some of the thousand or so college students gathered for this Campus Crusade for Christ event reflect on the content of this little-known collection of oracles that is the closing bracket of the Old Testament.

As I turn to this text currently, I do so with a much greater awareness of the role it plays in setting the stage for the Messianic expectation fulfilled by Jesus in the New Testament. Without an appreciation for the content of this brief book (and certainly other anticipatory scriptures in the Hebrew Canon) Jesus' arrival as recorded in Matthew's Gospel would seem abrupt. Malachi provides requisite context for understanding the eschatological expectations of the abused Judean community, and it resonates with the concerns of other groups suffering from a similar fate in the contemporary world.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Preparing the Way

The book that contains the writings attributed to a prophet named Malachi (literally "my messenger") is in an infrequently explored corner of our canon containing such rarely examined books as Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah. Malachi tends to be remembered only because it precedes Matthew's Gospel in Protestant English Bibles. It is an obscure book with vague prophecies that, among faithful members of African American congregations, never gained the popularity of the oracles of the prophets Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah. Moreover, it is a book that suffers from benign neglect, because most of us who are preachers turn to Malachi only during our "moments on Giving" or Stewardship Sundays, where the familiar phrase "robbing God" comes forth and demands us to bring our tithe to the storehouse (Mal 3:8-10). Otherwise, until the time of Advent, the book of Malachi is a relative mystery to us as contemporary Christians.

There is no consensus on the boundaries of this particular pericope. However, I believe it is helpful to consider beginning at 2:17 and then extend to 3:1-4 or 3:1-5 because the extra verses include a relevant justice framework that provides context for our pericope. By beginning at 2:17, we learn what it is that angered YHWH. Two statements are offered as examples: 1) declaring that YHWH delights in evildoers and deems them “good” and, 2) questioning “where is the God of Justice?” A perversion of right and wrong has occurred that threatens to undermine YHWH’s reputation as a God concerned with justice; because evil is so prevalent, the people have come to question their God. The problem of evil, or theodicy, arises, for if God is good, how can evil exist?¹ It is amid the controversy arising from such questions that YHWH sends “his messenger.”

Though I have suggested that the messenger mentioned in this book is its author, Christian tradition has offered other potential candidates. Some have suggested it was Elijah the prophet (Malachi 4:5) or a reforming Messianic priest.² The gist of Malachi 3:1 is surprisingly similar to Isaiah 40:3, where a messenger “in the wilderness” prepares the way for the Lord. It is interesting to note that the term for Lord that occurs in 3:1 is not translated YHWH or even the familiar *Adoni*, but *ha-adon* a generic term for Lord. Perhaps this signals some distinction between the coming one and YHWH. However we conceive of this coming figure and his relationship to YHWH, he is coming for a purpose. The purpose appears to be the cleansing of the Levites, the priests of old who offer sacrifices to Israel’s God. The language used for the work of the messenger is that of “fire,” “soap,” “purifying,” and “refining.” As we come to Advent there is a need for all of us—preachers, church leaders, and congregants -- to be purified and refined so that we will be able to best serve the coming King. The coming Lord deserves a Church that is prepared for his arrival.

The purification of the religious leaders in the text was so that they would present offerings to YHWH “in righteous/justice.” I favor this translation of the phrase *betsedaqah* to the NRSV’s “in righteousness” because of the nature of the offenses described in 3:5. These include what can be seen as moral offenses (sorcery, adultery, swearing falsely), violations of justice (oppressing hired hands, widows, orphans, and abusing resident aliens), and even religious violations (the people do not fear YHWH). For this reason, the translation of *betsedaqah*, as “righteous/justice” seems appropriate; it unites both stereotypical extremes of the Christian spectrum.

Traditionally, conservative Christians are known for focusing on proper internal individual behavior, practicing personal piety, though typically minimizing matters of social justice. Similarly, liberal Christians have tended to emphasize proper interpersonal relations, doing “justice for the least of these,” and uplifting the oppressed, but often with a more relaxed view of personal piety. This term, however, testifies that, with God, neither extreme is acceptable. God requires that we do justice and be holy!

The coming of the Lord in 3:1 hints at the expectations of the people in first century Palestine. Followers of YHWH are eager for the Lord to come, and prior to God’s arrival, his messenger must make his appearance to set things in order. Though this passage addresses an expectation centuries older, it lends itself to a pairing with Gospel passages that address John the Baptizer, as he is a similar figure. Like the Malachi messenger, John comes to prepare the way of the Lord and engages in a ministry of “baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sins.” As the Malachi

passage suggests the messenger's priestly affiliation, we should note that John is the son of Zechariah, a priest, and that his lineage makes him an appropriate reforming figure. Further, in the Gospels, it is John's purifying activity, readying the hearts and minds of believers that establishes the conditions under which Jesus' arrival takes place and his ministry begins. This is the central movement of Advent—establishing the conditions in our heart and in our world year after year and even day after day, for the arrival of Christ and not just as he comes to us during Christmas.

In this season of Advent as we await the Lord's arrival, it is an appropriate time to ask if we have gotten things right. Are we the Church to which we want the Lord to return? Is our faith "righteous" as it was in the "days of old?" (v. 3:4)

The writer of Malachi suggests that there was something special and correct about the way Judah and Jerusalem presented themselves to YHWH in the days of old. There was something special about the way our foreparents approached God, too, and it can be instructive for us today. We can learn a great deal from the faith of our foremothers and forefathers; for it was their faith and relationship with God that sustained them through the furnaces that "refined" them. Their faith brought them through slavery, lynching, rape, Jim and Jane Crow, cross burnings, genocide, and much more. Theirs was a faith that was tested by an awful oppression but they never forgot that God was their deliverer and sustainer, in spite of all that the world did to them.

Such "old time religion" is a requisite remembrance in our day, when the prosperity gospel has convinced many of our people that Jesus died to make them rich, and the American conservative, Evangelical gospel has convinced others that God's values are synonymous with American values. In the latter instance, blind patriotism to our nation is falsely correlated with obedience to God. To remember the faith of our ancestors is to remember that we cannot put our faith in finances (for they had none in which to trust), nor in the righteousness of the state (for they were betrayed by the nation to which they pledged allegiance); the faith of our ancestors taught them, and it teaches us, that in God alone we should place our trust, for only God has been faithful to us. With this understanding and with this hope in the God who dwells among us, we participate in the Advent Season.

Celebration

During Advent, the purifying required of all who would reign with Christ calls us all to repentance as we get ready to symbolically celebrate the arrival of our king. In Christ, God has made a way for us to overcome various types of sins, some moral lapses, some violations of social justice, and some offenses that belong in other categories. Though each of these offenses needs to be examined, confessed, and repented, we can rest assured that Christ has put these all behind us. Christ enables us to offer our gifts and ourselves to our God with righteous/justice, knowing that we have attended to both God's call on our lives for social justice and personal piety.

Descriptive Details

The air of pregnant expectation for the coming of the messenger in this passage of Malachi is poignant. The heat of the refiner's fire permeates this text and offers a metaphor ripe for preaching.

Notes

1. Cartensen, Roger. The Book of Malachi, Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1971. p. 514.
2. Ibid.