

13 December 2020

The Sun of Righteousness Isaiah 4:2-6

We read today the final verses in our Old Testament. These verses are, appropriately, a prophecy of the coming Messiah. And the Messiah that this prophet was waiting for was not going to fool around. We read Malachi 4, verses 1-6:

4 See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ²But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts. ⁴Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. ⁵Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. ⁶He will turn the hearts of 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.

This Advent season, we've been looking at some of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, and one of the things we've noted along the way is that each biblical writer imagined the coming savior in a unique way. The writer of Deuteronomy imagined the coming one as a New Moses, a lawgiver who would restore respect for God's laws. Isaiah of Jerusalem imagined a New Davidic King, who would restore the glory of Israel and return it to its covenant with God. Each of these messianic visions reflects the specific needs of the time it was written, as well as the specific mind of the writer. This isn't surprising. Most of us, if asked, would imagine a somewhat different Messiah, too. Then we looked at what the Messiah actually was like, when he came as Jesus of Nazareth and concluded that Jesus was indeed a new lawgiver and a new king, but both different and better than either of the prophecies had realized.

So what sort of Messiah does Malachi long for in today's passage? He wants an angry Messiah who will come and kick some tail. "On that day," he says, "God will burn all those arrogant evil-doers to the ground, like stubble." Then the "sun of righteousness" will come and vindicate all the faithful ones and heal them, after which they will go out and trample the dust of their enemies into the ground.

Well, that's special.

We don't actually know anything about this prophet Malachi. We aren't even sure that's his real name, since Malachi just means "my messenger." Because he mentions a "governor" of Judea instead of a king, we can guess that he lived during the time of the Persian Empire, when Judea was a minor province with an appointed governor. Maybe 400 years before Christ. But beyond that we don't know a whole lot about his circumstances; all we know is that he's *angry* about them. This isn't just righteous indignation; this is personal. Malachi doesn't want evil-doers to be defeated; he wants them crushed, and he wants the Messiah to bring the "great and terrible Day of the Lord" on the wicked so that he can dance on their graves.

Now, before we go any farther, let me stress that the Bible makes room for anger. This book of divine inspiration is firmly set in the real world, and every genuine emotion – healthy or

unhealthy – finds expression here, including seething resentment. There is a whole set of psalms called the “Psalms of Imprecation” or “Cursing Psalms” – prayers that God will give the psalmist’s enemies a 24-karat, gilt-edged smiting. Those psalms are seriously vindictive and make us uncomfortable enough that you’ve probably never heard a sermon on one, but they’re there. Go read Psalm 109 sometime. In the Men at Prayer Thursday morning Bible study, we recently read the book of the prophet Nahum, which is a three-chapter hate poem directed at Assyria, a verbal happy dance over the news that Assyria’s capital, Nineveh, had been destroyed and thousands of Assyrians slaughtered. Seething, vengeful anger is not unique to Malachi in scripture. All this is biblical, but be careful. The fact that it’s in the Bible does not mean God approves it. Just because a human emotion finds expression in scripture does not mean it’s from God. We can pray, with the psalmists, for God to wreak vengeance on our personal enemies, but that doesn’t mean God will do it. Among the many things that God is *not*, God is not our personal enforcer. And yet, that’s how Malachi seems to imagine the Messiah: the one who will come and burn the people Malachi disapproves of to the ground.

So, as we’re asking each week, did Jesus fulfill this messianic vision? In a word, no. It’s true that Jesus occasionally showed anger himself, but almost exclusively at hypocritical religious leaders who abused their position and took advantage of the faithful. And his anger is always inspired by injustice done to others; it’s never personal, and *never* vindictive. Instead, what do we find in Jesus? “I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” “If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn to him the other cheek. If someone forces you to walk a mile, walk two.” “How many times should you forgive someone? No, seven times isn’t enough. Forgive them seventy times seven. In other words, forgive them until you’ve lost count and forgotten how to do anything else.” In Jesus we have the man who was arrested unjustly in the garden and didn’t resist, but rather rebuked Peter for trying to. “Put away your sword!” We have a man who went to his death without cursing his killers but rather saying, “Father, forgive them; they don’t know what they’re doing.” In other words, the Messiah who actually came to earth turned out to be the exact opposite of the one that Malachi wanted.

But that fevered revenge-fantasy Messiah has never completely gone away. Throughout the history of the Church, there have been those who have re-imagined the Messiah as an avenger, and it started early. A couple of generations after Christ, the Roman Empire began horrible, violent, sadistic punishments of Christians, and from the midst of one of those times of persecution we have the Book of Revelation, which pictures Christ coming back on a white horse at the head of an army to rescue his oppressed people and punish their persecutors. Revelation is the Cursing Psalm of the New Testament. It makes most of us seriously uncomfortable, including me, but I can understand where it’s from. If I faced death or torture or the death and torture of my family because I was a Christian, I’d dream of that kind of Christ, too.

But not everyone who imagines an avenging Christ is in that desperate situation. Some people just want a tough guy Messiah to settle scores. In our nation, where Christianity is the majority religion and Christians are emphatically *not* persecuted, there are still many who dream of a Messiah who will mess you up. One strain of American Christianity has long merged its faith with a hyper-masculine, pro-gun, pro-military, aggressive, take no guff from anyone ideal. Some early Methodist circuit riders were known for preaching with a pistol on the pulpit and occasionally pointing it at disruptive elements. (Probably effective during the altar call, too. “If you wish to give your life to Jesus, just raise your hand. I *said* hands up!”) Evangelist Billy Sunday, in the early 20th century, preached a “muscular Christianity,” with a Christ who was a

true He-Man, and Billy Sunday's revivals during the First World War often morphed into pro-war rallies. (Speaking of "muscular Christianity," it isn't just America. This week I ran across a picture of a Korean statue of Christ on the cross where Jesus is *jacked*. He's depicted as a 15-year-old boy's body building fantasy. Apparently Jesus could also turn water into protein shakes.)

But when your picture of the Messiah is infused with that much machismo, you end up with a Christ divorced from the Christ of the gospels, and if your Christ is like that, your faith is unrecognizable as well. In 2016, Texas pastor Robert Jeffress endorsed candidate Donald Trump, and when he was asked how he could support someone who is not notable for embodying the teachings of Christ, he replied: "I want the meanest, toughest, son-of-a-you-know-what in that role, and I think that's where a lot of [Christians] are." Hear what Dr. Jeffress is saying there. He knows the gospels. He knows Jesus' life and teachings. And he's decided that, at least for this role, that's not what the church needs. He thinks the church needs an SOB. Jesus would not be satisfactory; he wants John Wayne. Or John Wick. But perhaps the most horrifying example of the revenge-fantasy Messiah is the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, which imagines Christ's return in novel form. These books are based loosely and inaccurately on the Book of Revelation, but they take that book much farther – glorying in gory depictions of Christ's revenge on most of the world. As one commentator puts it, "The series ends in a violent bloodbath ushered in by Christ himself. The conquering Christ brings peace through the sword, slaying tens of thousands of opposition soldiers who fall dead, 'splayed and filleted' . . . In acts of unprecedented violence, Christ's enemies get what they had coming" (Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, p. 89).

This is not Christ. Not if Jesus of Nazareth was Christ.

In this Advent season, we remember that we too wait for Christ. A part of our faith is that Christ will return, and that one day we will share Christ's resurrection and meet him face to face. We are in the limbo time, existing between Christ's victory and God's ultimate peace. So we wait. As we wait, what sort of Christ are we looking for? Not, I hope, Malachi's Messiah. It makes no sense to imagine that Christ will appear as the exact opposite of who he was when he came to earth the first time. As the prophet Hosea puts it, "[He] is God, not man, and [he] will not come in anger" (Hosea 11:9).

So I don't know what to do with Malachi's messianic vision, any more than I know what to do with most of Revelation. At one level, I'm glad that we have such writings in scripture. The last thing we need is a make-believe Bible that pretends that the world is prettier and nicer than it is. On the other hand, the measuring rod of all scripture is the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, and I don't know any way to reconcile these writings with the Jesus we find in the gospels. I'm going to wait for the return of that Christ. But at least Malachi turns a corner at the end. After the revenge prophecy, Malachi – speaking for God – says, *Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of 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.*

That prophecy is fulfilled, and next week, we'll talk about the Elijah who came, the one who truly prepared the way of the Lord.