

# “Putting Out The Fire” Malachi 4:1-6

November 17, 2013

26<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

We'd like to think human beings are pretty clever and skillful in constructing things. It only takes an event like the typhoon in the Philippines to see the utter foolishness in such thinking. The pictures coming from that part of the world this past week show the complete destruction of human structures and human beings. Hurricane Katrina showed us the same thing a few years ago in its massive destruction of New Orleans and the gulf coast area. Even the summer forest fires in Montana give us a taste of this destructive power a little closer to home. I remember going up to St. Mary's one summer after the fires and seeing the blackened ground and the stubble of the burnt trees which were left there.

So called “natural disasters” and the destruction they cause are often referred to as “acts of God” (especially when filing insurance claims). But would a loving and just God intentionally bring about such massive destruction? Our text today from Malachi warns of a time when there will be destruction far worse than any typhoon, any hurricane, or any fire here on earth. It is something the Bible refers to as “the day of the Lord.” The day of the Lord is spoken of time and time again by the prophets in the Old Testament. It is referred to by Jesus in our Gospel reading for today when the people were marveling over the human achievement in building a marvelous temple. St. Peter warns of it in his epistles. St. John describes it in the book of Revelation.

What is the “day of the Lord”? The day of the Lord is when a holy and righteous God will carry out His judgment against sinful humanity. We may have trouble with this image of God, not because the Bible doesn't teach it, but because it conflicts with our self-developed image of God as a kindly grandfather figure or a good buddy. The Bible describes God as loving, but also as holy. He created humanity in His image as holy, something we all lost because of Adam and Eve's fall into sin. While He loves all people, He cannot and will not allow sin in His presence.

While God has been remarkably patient with a world that has rejected Him, rejected what He says is wrong, rejected what He says is right, that will all come to an end on the day of the Lord. There will be a final judgment where sin and all who commit it will be destroyed. This destruction will be far worse than any typhoon, hurricane, or forest fire. Our text says this day is coming, burning like an oven (or, perhaps, like a furnace), when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. “The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts.”

We may be cheering this on, thinking, “It’s about time those evildoers got what was coming to them,” until we stop and realize what an evildoer or sinner is according to the Word of God. We think an evildoer is someone who has done particularly horrible sins – stealing people’s money, taking people’s lives and so on – or someone who has done a great number of sins. When compared with a God who is holy and whose standard is perfection, an evildoer is someone who has done any sin, big or small, frequently or infrequently. The Bible clearly says, “For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23) Everyone who has even lived on this earth is in danger of this judgment. That means you and that means me. No one can avoid this fire or put it out through acts of personal piety or charitable deeds. We are toast – spiritually and literally.

But it’s more than that. All of the beautiful accomplishments of men will also be totally destroyed. Jesus says the temple in Jerusalem would be left with not one stone upon another. That destruction carried out by the Roman troops in 70 AD was only a foreshadowing of the destruction to come, as is the destruction wrought by hurricanes, typhoons (the roaring of the seas and waves, Jesus says), and other acts of God. By God’s Word, this world was made and by God’s Word this world will be destroyed. St. Peter writes, “by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly... But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.” (2 Peter 3:7,10)

Not a very pleasant thought which is why people don't like to contemplate a holy God, nor think about a final judgment. It's not happy. It doesn't make us feel good. It scares us. It frightens us to death. It's intended to do so. It is to drive us to fear – not fear of the judgment, the fire, and the destruction, but to the fear of the Lord and trust in His mercy and promises.

The Lord, through Malachi, promises a way out of this judgment and an escape from the flames and destruction. He says, "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings." Does that description ring a bell? Maybe it doesn't in this context. But those words should be very familiar for they are used in a beloved hymn by Charles Wesley.

*Hail, the heav'n-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness  
Light and life to all He brings, Risen' with healing in His wings.*

This beloved Christmas hymn shows what the purpose of Christ's birth was all about. We soften and sentimentalize Jesus' birth. We emphasize the cuteness of a baby born in a manger (although, truth be told, in real life there was nothing cute about such a scenario). The only theological significance we attach to it since, after all, we are talking about a baby is that it displays God's love in some sort of emotional way.

Wesley's use of the Malachi passage in a Christmas hymn shows that this baby was not born to give us warm fuzzy feelings or just to be a cute part of a winter holiday. He came into this world to save us from God's wrath and judgment; from fire and destruction; from eternal death and hell.

This was obviously something He did not do by being born or something He could do as a baby. However, 33 years later, Jesus did just that on a cross. Good Friday is really judgment day. All of our sin and all of the sin of the world was placed on Jesus on that cross. There God's wrath was unleashed upon His holy Son for the sake of sinful people like you and me. Jesus is our Savior by being our shield. He shielded us from God's wrath against our sin by taking God's wrath upon Himself.

His blood shed upon the cross earns forgiveness for all of our sins. Forgiveness for all of our sins receives justification, that is, a declaration by God to each of you that you are not guilty in His sight. Being not guilty in His sight means that we have a holiness not of our own but of Christ which

protects us from the day of the Lord which is to come. As St. Paul wrote to the Romans, “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.” (Rom. 5:9)

This is what Jesus showed to the world by rising from the dead on Sunday morning. As I said last week, it was because of this that early Christians chose Sunday (which they called the Lord’s Day) as their day of worship, the day on which we continue to worship. It is our day of victory. It is our day of hope. It is our day of eternal life. St. Jerome, a church father of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, put it this way,”

“The Lord’s day, however, the day of the resurrection, the day of Christians, is our day. It is called the Lord’s day because on this day the Lord ascended to the Father as victor. But when the heathen call it the day of the sun, we are most happy to acknowledge their title, for today has risen ‘the Sun of [righteousness] with its healing wings.’ (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, vol XIV, p.31).

We look at the world and the impending doom which seems so often to be a part of it in a much different way now. We see the so-called “acts of God” as actually being that – acts of God which are previews of the destruction which is yet to come. They are warnings to us who are Christians and, especially, to those who are not Christians, of the coming wrath of God in judgment. They call us to fear and repentance. They call us to hope and faith.

In that hope and faith there is no fear – only anticipation and joy. On the day of the Lord, far from being fearful, we will “go out leaping like calves from the stall.” In other words, we will be giddy with joy at the appearance of the sun of righteousness and the healing in his wings. One commentator put it this way:

As the rays of the sun spread light and warmth over the earth for the growth and maturity of the plants and living creatures so will the sun of righteousness bring the healing of all hurts and wounds which the power of darkness has inflicted upon the righteous. (Keil/Delitzsch, 10, p. 469)

It is no wonder then that Jesus tells us not to fear the signs of the coming day of the Lord. We have nothing to fear. We have everything to look forward to. We do not face God’s wrath and judgment. Jesus faced it for us. We face only God’s welcome to eternal life. Jesus earned that for

us. Therefore, the end times are to be anticipated, not dreaded. Jesus says, "Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." And soon, soon, it will be here. Amen.