

“Being Remembered in a Forgotten Time”

Malachi 3:13-18

November 24, 2013

Last Sunday of the Church Year

With the world going downhill as deep and as fast as it is, we really must consider the question that many are thinking, but few are willing to ask: Is it worth it? Is it worth it to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ and an active member of this congregation? Or, is all of this “end of the church year” and “end of the world” stuff just something to scare us and keep us in line? When we look the natural disasters, we don’t see them as “signs of the time” and a precursor to the End of the World. We see them as random unconnected sufferings. We may conclude that God has simply forgotten us and for that, we despair, become apathetic or indifferent. It is evident by the actions of many in this world and some in this congregation that, no, it isn’t worth it. The confession and practice of the Christian faith have been rejected or abandoned by many. But what about you? Is it worth it to you to be a practicing Christian?

Just as this is not the first time in history where it seems as if the world is going to pot, it is also not the first time this question has been raised. In fact, it is raised by the people of Israel in our text from Malachi for today. Their complaints may be the same as ours.

The Lord chastises the people of Israel for their hard words against Him. What were those hard words? The people said, “It is vain to serve God.” In other words, it is futile – a waste of time – to serve God. Why? They didn’t feel they were getting enough in return for their service. Do you feel the same? Coming to church every single week and sometimes twice a week during Advent and Lent – is it a waste of time? The hours you put in serving as an officer, serving on a board, teaching Sunday School or Midweek, and so on – is it really worth in what you get out of it?

The people said, “What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts?” What good is there in being good – in keeping the commands of God and following His Law? Shouldn’t He bless us in some way when we do good or help our neighbor? The people of Israel thought God should. Do you?

It's not just that we don't get blessed monetarily, materially, and in other ways. Those who don't deserve it are the ones who always seem to be getting blessed all the time. The people said, "And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape." Some translate the word "arrogant" as pagan. They were complaining that it is the unbelievers who are blessed and are succeeding. Do you feel the same? Doesn't it seem as if it is the unbelievers who have the cushy jobs, the full bank accounts, the big houses, and all the electronic toys while faithful Christians have little or none of that. As if that wasn't bad enough, the people who do evil not only prosper but they thumb their noses in the face of God and are not punished for it. It is so unfair being a Christian and practicing our faith. It's just not right. Wouldn't you agree?

The assumption here is that God owes us. When we do something right, He owes us a blessing. When we show up at church, God should be happy. When we give an offering, God should bless us in return. When we do something good, God should give us something good because of that. When we avoid doing evil, God should keep evil from coming to us. When we actually verbalize what we have maybe only thought about on the inside, we sound less and less like faithful Christians and more and more like spoiled children.

The truth of the matter is God owes us nothing. He owes us nothing when we do nothing. He owes us nothing even when we do all that we can. But we owe Him big time. He requires us to be holy as He is holy. Until we fulfill that, He owes us nothing. None of us is coming close to that. All our righteous acts - our best efforts, the Scripture says, are like filthy rags. And what about our sin - our failure to do good and our frequency in doing bad? Every sin we commit adds to our debt to God. In fact, the old English version of the Lord's Prayer calls sins "debts" as in, "Forgive us our debts and we forgive our debtors." God owes us nothing, except His wrath, His judgment, His condemnation, and His punishment.

Malachi mentions another group in addition to those who have spoken against God in their complaints and failed to trust in Him. These are the people who fear the Lord, that is, believe and

trust in Him. Are they any less sinful or more deserving of God's favor than the first group? Not at all. They are also sinful, but, rather than demanding God's blessing, they trust in God's mercy.

Those, both in Malachi's time and in our present day, who trust in the Lord's mercy – they will receive mercy, not as something owed them, but something freely given them. God says, "I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him." Do you know what the ironic thing about this is? God spared us by NOT sparing His Son, Jesus Christ, who served Him.

Consider the magnitude of this statement. Our epistle describes Jesus as the Son of God in more than a metaphorical or symbolic way. Jesus "is the image of the invisible God...by him all things were created....he is before all things and in him all things hold together...in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." (Colossians 1)

This is the One who would usher in the Kingdom of God, but not in the usual way in which a kingdom is ushered in. It was not by clever political maneuverings or raw military might that Jesus brought about the Kingdom of God, but through the foolishness of a cross and Jesus' humble and weak death there.

Normally, the Gospel reading for today would make no sense on a Sunday devoted to the coming Kingdom of God. But that's only if you think of the Kingdom of God as a political entity or a military machine. That's why so many people mocked Jesus while he hung on the cross. He failed to fulfill their expectations of a political Savior or a military Messiah. The leaders said, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" The soldiers got in on the fun, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" Even one of the criminals crucified with Jesus said the same thing, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

But Jesus came to establish a different kind of Kingdom in a different way and that's why the Gospel reading is perfect for this day. God would reconcile the world to himself – that is, make peace with sinful humanity – not by overlooking sin or punishing sinners, but by not sparing His Son who hung on the cross – by punishing Him for the sin of the world. All sin for all people for all time was dealt with on that cross that day. God made peace by the blood of Jesus' cross. As Paul wrote to

the Colossians, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Col. 1:13-14)

That’s not all though. This Savior, who shed His blood on the cross so that we might have forgiveness and died that we might live, rose from the dead. Jesus’ service to His Father is not merely a past event establishing a kingdom which we look back on. By Jesus’ resurrection of the dead and His present life, we are promised an eternal kingdom in heaven to which we look forward. That is our whole hope as Christians and the reason why it is worth it to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. It is not for blessing in this life that we look to Christ in faith, but it is the blessing in the life to come that we look forward to in faith and which makes everything worth it.

Unlike other promises of hope and forecasts of the future which may or may not come true, this is a sure thing. God has not forgotten you or abandoned you. God has made a list of all those who are in His Kingdom. Malachi speaks of “a book of remembrance” containing the names of “those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name.” The New Testament speaks of a “book of life” in which are written the names of all who trust in Jesus Christ. You who trust in Him have your names written there.

This is more than just an accounting of names. In our text, the Lord says, “They shall be mine in the day when I make up my treasured possession.” (Malachi 3:17) Those whose names are written in the book belong to the Lord. We are His treasured possession. He is coming to gather His treasured possession in the day – in the day of the Lord.

On that day, Jesus, the king who wore a crown of thorns in weakness on the cross, will come in a crown of glory on the clouds of heaven. There will be judgment. All of the inequity between evildoers who succeeded and the righteous who suffered will be set straight. Malachi says, “Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and the one who does not serve him.”

In Jesus’ teaching about that judgment in Matthew 25, He shows exactly what the distinction involves. To those who have spoken against the Lord in unbelief and rejection of His grace, Jesus

will say, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

(Matthew 25:41)

But to us and all who trust in the Lord and His mercy through Jesus Christ, Jesus will say, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. (Matthew 25:34) And we, as His treasured possession will be with Him for all eternity in blessed peace and unimaginable joy.

One thing I immediately noticed after moving to Montana was the obituaries out here. In the Midwest, obituaries are very short. They list such things as day of birth, education, job, marriage, and survivors of the deceased. Out here, obituaries turn into mini-biographies which tell every last detail in the life of the deceased and paint a picture of a saint of the highest caliber. I’ve concluded that people create such obituaries because they desperately don’t want their loved one to be ignored or forgotten. As Christians who trust in the Lord and toil in obscurity while serving Him, we might worry that we, too, will be ignored or forgotten. Rather than complain about the unfairness of the situation as the people did in the time of Malachi, continue to trust in the Lord. He has redeemed you by His blood. He has forgiven you all your sins by His death. He has opened paradise to you by His resurrection you. He has not nor will He ever forget you. Your name is written in the book of remembrance – the book of life. He is preparing a place for you. He will come and take you to that place to be with Him for all eternity. Don’t ever forget: you are always remembered!