

Wednesday, December 9, 2009 Malachi 3:1-4

Don't you just love the sounds of Christmas? "Frosty, the Snow Man, was a jolly, happy soul." "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas." "Oh, you better watch out, you better not cry, you better not shout I'm telling you why..."

Are those the sounds of Christmas? Of course not! We know the true sounds of Christmas - "Oh Come, all Ye Faithful!" "Joy to the World, the Lord is come!" The true sounds of Christmas focus on Christ our Savior.

But as the Lord prepared His people to welcome their Savior as He began His public ministry, the sounds the people heard weren't carols being sung by the fire, but the sound of a messenger in the desert region east of Jerusalem. Let's focus on this second word of Christmas - Prepare! The Lord prepares human hearts for His Son to enter 1) Through John the Baptist's Ministry of Repentance; 2) Through Jesus' Ministry of Purifying; 3) Through Our Ministry of Praise.

Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet, wrote about 400 years before Christ, about one hundred years after the Babylonian Captivity. That century was a period of religious enthusiasm and revival. The Jews rebuilt the temple. They re-fortified Jerusalem. Then they settled down to wait for the Messiah. What usually happens when everything is going your way and you are just idly waiting for God's next move? Apathy, complacency, pride and self-righteousness set in. Malachi's 4 brief chapters record that the people brought blind, crippled and diseased animals for sacrifice. They robbed God by not bringing in their full tithe. They lived life to the fullest and gave God the leftovers. They developed very loose divorce laws, divorcing their believing wives to marry unbelievers whose lifestyles seemed more attractive. The priests made a mockery of God by showing partiality in preaching the law and by offering the half-hearted offerings the people brought to the temple.

No wonder God said through Malachi. **"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me."** Who is this messenger? 400 years later an angel appeared to a priest, Zechariah, to announce his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son. They were to name Him John. **"He will be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth," the angel revealed. He will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.** After John was born his father, moved by the Holy Spirit, prophesied, **"And you my child will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins."** The people streamed out into the desert area to hear John preach. "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near!" He pronounced. Many confessed their sins and were baptized for the forgiveness of their sins.

The Lord prepares our hearts to welcome our Savior by using that same message. The Holy Spirit leads us to repent of our sin. To repent means literally to change your mind about sin. While we may have formerly enjoyed sin, now our sins sadden us. We are disgusted to know that our sinful hearts mistrust God, lust, are covetous and greedy, and hold grudges against friends and loved ones. And by the Spirit's power we have a new heart that no longer rejects God's gift of forgiveness, but in faith trusts Jesus is the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world! What a joy to know that Jesus lived a perfect life in place of our sinful lives. God's perfect Son came down to earth to die so that sinful people could live with Him forever in a perfect heaven.

Malachi speaks of a second messenger who would come. **"Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire will come," says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For He will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will**

sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.”

Jesus is that Lord the believers of old were seeking. His parents brought Him to His temple as an infant to present Him to the Lord. Jesus came to His temple at the age of 12, instructing the teachers in His Father’s House. He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, stormed into His temple and drove out the money changers. God the Father had heaped the world’s sin upon Him as He made the ultimate and final sacrifice for sin. And when He paid sin’s punishment in full, He died and at that moment what happened? The curtain separating the holy from the most holy place in His temple was torn in two. God had accepted Jesus’ sacrifice and now our sin no longer separates us from Him. God was done working through His earthly temple, for on the third day Jesus rose from the dead and returned to His heavenly temple. There He forgives our sins, prays for us, and by baptism sends His Holy Spirit to dwell within us. Now we are the temple of the Lord.

Thank God He still refines and purifies us today that we might be pure temples in which the Lord dwells. When the Lord allows afflictions to enter our lives, He turns us away from the love for this world that captivates so many people’s hearts. He refines from our hearts the false, worldly hopes that deceive so many people. When we come to despair and we see our helpless condition, the Lord purifies us by giving us faith in Jesus, and **“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 8:1).

Did you know that you too are part of this 2,400 year old prophecy? Malachi writes, **“He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD as in days gone by, as in former years.”** The Hebrew word used for offerings refers not to sacrifices for sin, but to the grain offerings which were thank offerings the Israelites offered in gratitude to the Lord.

We are those who bring offerings acceptable to God today, for His apostle tells us, **“You are...are chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.”** (1 Peter 2:9) As God’s New Testament priests we offer our entire life as a living sacrifice of thanksgiving for the Lord’s salvation. We bring His Word to the world. We bring the world, our church, our family, and our own needs to Him in prayer. We declare His praises and shine His light into the dark world.

But sometimes even we still have rather dark, sad thoughts at this time of year. Do you perhaps feel this year Christ has been stolen from your Christmas – by some difficulty or personal loss? Do you wonder how Christ can be in your Christmas when everything in life seems to be working against you?

In Wellington, Florida, someone stole a valuable ceramic figurine of the Christ Child from a nativity scene. They didn’t want a Christ-less Christmas, so they replaced it, but this time they put a GPS tracking device inside the figurine. When The Christ Child disappeared again the next Christmas, the GPS signal led sheriff’s deputies to the thief’s apartment.

The Advent message from God’s Word, like a spiritual GPS, prepares us to celebrate the birth of our Savior by guiding us to look for the Savior in the manger, on the cross, and risen from the dead for our eternal salvation! Jesus is in heaven ruling over all things for His Church’s good, and He is with us always to the end of this age. Until you see Him with your own eyes, look for Jesus in the Word of God and in the celebration of His Supper. That’s where you will find Christ at Christmas and throughout your life, until the time of spiritual preparation is over and Christ welcomes you to the home He has prepared for you in heaven. That’s the ultimate goal of His love as He prepares the way for the Lord into our hearts again today. Amen.