

The God of Justice
Malachi 2:17-3:6

In the aftermath of Tuesday's elections, it seems that there's only one thing which all Americans really want. Some march or even riot in the streets because they think that systemic racism has stacked the deck in favor of certain ethnic groups. Others complain that corrupt politicians have selectively enforced the laws in order to advance their preferred policies. Some cast doubt on the whole political system, believing that it is no longer possible for elections to determine the legitimate will of the voters. But everyone is really crying out for the same thing: for justice.

Things were even worse in Malachi's time. After all, in those days the people of God had no political power at all. Instead of being ruled by a descendant of David who reigned in Jerusalem, they had been conquered by the Babylonians well over a hundred years earlier. Yes, the Persians had seized control from the Babylonians, and had allowed God's people to return to the Promised Land and rebuild their Temple and the walls of Jerusalem. But make no mistake: the Persian governor was really in charge, and the Persian kings made all the rules.

So, if they wanted justice, Malachi's generation had no access to any of the basic tools of democracy: the ballot box, the jury box, the witness stand, and the ranks of the citizen militia. No, all they could do was to trust God and to pray.

But that was just the problem. For the last verse of chapter 2 indicates that many of them had lost faith in God. Some of them noticed how wicked people were prospering and came to the conclusion that God was actively blessing those who do evil. Others had simply been crying out for justice for so long that they began to doubt whether God was listening to their prayers at all. "Where is the God of justice?" – that's what they wanted to know.

And maybe that's how you feel on this Sunday after election day. Regardless of what political party you favor, maybe you've been waiting a long time for God to turn the tables, to punish those you consider to be wicked and to reward those you consider to be righteous, to protect the weak and humiliate the strong. And maybe you've begun to wonder if He's listening; maybe you wonder if He even exists.

Well, then Malachi's message just might be good news for you. For the fact is that, in chapter 3 verse 5, the Lord promises that He will draw near to us for judgment. And make no mistake – at the end of the verse He identifies Himself as the "Lord of hosts," the almighty commander of all the armies of angels in heaven. That means that no man or woman, no matter how wealthy or powerful, and no political system, no matter how popular or respected, could possibly hope to stand against Him. That all sounds good to those who cry out for justice, doesn't it?

But in the same verse, the Lord also promises to be a witness against the wicked. And what a witness! For God is not only almighty – He also sees everything and knows everything. He counts all the stars and knows them by name. He even knows how many hairs are on each of our heads – or how few! It is this God Who promises to reveal everything that anyone might try to conceal. He promises to bring every word and deed out of darkness and into the light of day. Is that still good news for all of us?

Oh, and notice all the different categories of people that the Lord says He will judge. Yes, many of us might join in the outrage when we hear the first half of this list. We might look forward to God sticking it to the sorcerers, the adulterers and the false swearers.

After all, it's easy for us to condemn sorcerers: not just witches and wizards, but anyone who tries to take advantage of the spiritual realm in one way or another, seeking to manipulate it to their own ends. It's easy for us to condemn adulterers, correctly blaming the breakdown of the family for so many of the social ills that plague our society – the poverty and illiteracy and increasing sexual confusion among our young people. And it's hard to deny that those who bear false witness or who simply remain silent about the crime in their community have made significant parts of our largest cities simply ungovernable. For how many criminals continue to break our laws because they know that no one will dare to speak the truth against them?

But this part of verse 5 isn't just aimed at unbelievers, is it? For when you get right down to it, even some Christians act like sorcerers. Think about the prosperity gospel preachers who wheedle ever larger contributions out of their followers, only to spend those gifts on luxuries from private jets to gold-plated bathroom fixtures. Aren't they just as guilty as the sorcerers of Malachi's time of appealing to spiritual realities in order to feather their own nests? And what about those who believe in the prosperity gospel, those who offer their gifts only so that they will receive even larger material blessings in return? Are they so different from the self-centered sorcerers of Malachi's time?

And it isn't just unbelievers who commit adultery, is it? Moreover, even if we don't go so far as to break our marriage vows through physical infidelity, how many get married or remain married for selfish reasons? How many Christians put other kinds of pleasure before duty, or put self-fulfillment before responsibility? How many Christians live as if our own feelings are the most important thing in life? We may not act like adulterers, but do we share their priorities?

And it isn't just those who tell lies in the witness box who are undermining our civilization, are they? Are those who repeat damaging, unsubstantiated rumors really any better? If societies are based on trust, aren't all those who spread falsehood worthy of condemnation?

Oh, and what about the second half of the list we find in verse 5? When we hire people to work for us, are we really concerned if they have enough to support themselves and their families? Or are we just looking for a bargain? And even though widows and orphans now have all sorts of government programs to help them, are we doing what we can to incorporate people on the margins of our society into our congregations and communities? How welcoming are we to new immigrants – even to those who follow the proper procedures in order to move here legally?

So yes, we all want God to do justice – to other people, to those whom we consider to be wicked. But after taking a good long look at verse 5, how sure are we that the Almighty, all-knowing God won't bear witness against us?

In fact, take a look at verse 3: God actually says He will start the process of judgment, not with those whom we might consider to be flagrant sinners, but with the priests, the sons of Levi. Now remember, in Malachi's time, the priests had to observe elaborate rituals in order to preserve their ceremonial purity. As a result, everyone naturally looked up to them as moral and ethical examples – so

God is saying that He was going to bring justice to those whom everyone considered to be the best of the best.

And remember too, as we learned a few weeks ago, Peter insists that all Christians are called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. All those who have been washed in the blood of Christ are set apart from sin and set apart for God, called to love Him with all we are and all we have, called to love everyone else just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves. So, if God's coming judgment will start with the priests, that means it will start with us, with all those who claim the name of Christ. So, are we ready for Him to come? Are we as holy as we should be? Or do we still stand in need of God to purify us?

And notice one of the ways that Malachi says God will purify His people in verse 2: with fuller's or launderer's soap. Now, some of you might remember the sort of lye soap that my grandmother made – because lye dissolves grease, Mama would use it to clean things that were especially soiled or stained, but she certainly didn't use it on her hands, and she wouldn't let us go near it. It was strong stuff.

But the Hebrew word for "fuller's soap" is even stronger. For Old Testament people didn't make lye into soap. They would put straight lye in water and use that as a detergent, in much the same way that we might use it to clean ovens or to clear out clogged drains. I'm sure it would take out any stain – it's a wonder it didn't eat up their clothes. But that's the image God uses for His coming judgment: it will be like being scrubbed with oven cleaner. God will do whatever it takes to purge our sins from us, no matter how harsh or unpleasant His methods might seem.

But lye is nothing compared to the other image of God's purifying judgment: a refiner's fire. For as you know, most useful metals, such as copper, iron, silver, and gold, are found in rocks that include lots of other elements. So in order to isolate the metal you want, the rock has to go into a fire that is hot enough to melt it, fire that is thus as hot as a volcano. For it is only after the rock's initial form has been completely dissolved that all its impurities be skimmed off, allowing the desirable, purified metal to be used.

And this is exactly what the messenger of the Lord, the one whom Malachi mentions in the beginning of chapter 3, said that the Lord would do. Yes, John the Baptist washed those who repented of their sins with water as a symbol of their spiritual cleansing. But John said that the coming Messiah would go much further: He would baptize His people with volcanic fire, melting them down and burning away their sins from them the way a refiner removes impurities from ore.

And make no mistake: such a total transformation is what the Lord's perfect justice demands. For it is only as we go so far as to die to ourselves that any of us can hope to live holy lives, offering up all that we are and all that we have as the pure sacrifices that the Lord demands and deserves. The bottom line is that everything within us that is displeasing to God must be burned away, no matter how painful that process might be.

Ah, but what about those who refuse to repent? What about those who continue in the sorts of sin that Malachi lists in verse 5: the sorcerers and adulterers, the liars and oppressors, those who do not respect the Lord's power and wisdom? Well, John tells us that they will still experience the Lord's fire, but that it will have a different effect. For while the fire of the Holy Spirit purifies those who are

repentant, burning up our sins and making us fit to be gathered into God's barn, the Lord's fire will simply burn up the chaff, consuming it completely.

No, it's no wonder that Malachi wonders who would be able to endure the coming of the Lord. And such perfect justice is exactly what John the Baptist, the Messenger of the Lord, expected Jesus to carry out when He showed up.

So why didn't Jesus do what John and his followers expected? If Jesus came to pour out His purifying, sanctifying Holy Spirit on all who repent of their sins and trust in Him, why didn't He also burn up the unbelievers like chaff?

Well, verse 6 tells us why the unbelieving sons of Jacob, indeed why all the unbelievers all around the world have not yet been consumed: "I am the Lord. I change not." It is because the Lord keeps His covenant promises that He is withholding His perfect justice from all of us, at least for now.

And that is because of what Jesus, the One Whose coming both Malachi and John foretold, did in fact come to do. Oh, He could simply have blasted all the sorts of sinners listed in verse 5, and He could have destroyed all the unfaithful priests that we see in verse 3. But because He is faithful to His covenant promises, He instead took upon Himself the punishment that all of our sins deserve. Instead of destroying us, He died in our place so that we might be forgiven and freed, so that when God the Father looks at us, He might see only the perfect righteousness of Christ.

But Jesus also rose from the dead so that we might have new life, resurrection life, holy life. And because He lives, He continues to pour out the cleansing, sanctifying fire of His Holy Spirit on all His people, on all those who trust in Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord. And because He continues to burn more and more of our sins away from us each day, we will be able to stand in His presence when He comes again. Because of the ongoing, sanctifying work of Christ, none of His people will have anything left within us that needs to be destroyed on that day.

So, are you longing for justice today? Christ is coming, just as Malachi and John the Baptist said, coming to sweep away everyone and everything in this world that remains in rebellion against Him. So, have you completely surrendered to His sovereign majesty? Are you fully trusting in His perfect sacrifice? Even if it's with volcanic fire, will you allow His Holy Spirit to burn your sin from within you? Even if it's with lye soap, will you let Him wash you whiter than snow?