

## **TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | NOVEMBER 13, 2022**

MALACHI 4:1-2A | PSALM 98 | 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-13 | LUKE 21:5-19

As we get closer to the end of our church year, our readings begin to focus on God's final goal for creation. And today, we heard a rather startling vision of that goal from the prophet Malachi. What is striking about this passage is not just how vividly the prophet speaks about God's judgement. It's also his conviction that God's judgement is a good thing. Not something to be afraid of or scared of but something to look forward to.

This probably strikes most of us as strange. And so it helps to slow down here and unpack a couple of themes that Malachi is playing with. The first one has to do with judgement itself. For many of us, judgement has negative connotations. If someone told you that you were being "judgy," chances are they don't intend it as a compliment. After all, when we judge others, it's rarely out of a genuine concern for their welfare. It's often because of an insecurity about our own choices and a need for others to affirm us. We judge others to feel better about ourselves.

But the way Malachi understands divine judgement is different. God judges not out of insecurity but to seek our welfare. When Malachi says that God judges, he means that God recognizes the gap between the way the world is and the way it was created to be. So wherever there is violence, it is judged. Wherever there is abuse, it is judged. Wherever there is hunger, it is judged. When God sees the distance between the world God called "good" and the world we call "good enough," God doesn't simply shrug and say, "Well, it's not really for me to judge." God recognizes that there's a problem.

And so God gets involved. God gets involved by inspiring the words of the prophets like Malachi that call the people back to their covenant with God. God gets involved through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. And God gets involved through the creation and sustaining of the church.

And that last one includes all of us. As we've read from Luke's gospel over the past year, I've periodically reminded you that for Luke, sin is not primarily about people making their reverent best guess and turning out to be wrong. Sin is a failure to bother to love. It's less about incompetence than it is about indifference. It's about seeing the world's needs and just sort of shrugging. If you remember the parable of the Good Samaritan that we heard this fall, remember the image of sin in that story is not people who try to help the man in the ditch but mess up. It's people who move to the other side of the road.

God not only calls but empowers us to do more than just shrug at the world's problems. To make our reverent best guess at how to live as God's faithful people. And that means looking for the places where we see God's judgement of the world's suffering. This idea sounds weird, but we do this all the time. Why do we participate in feeding ministries? Because of God's judgement that it's wrong for people to go hungry. Why do we write cards to asylum seekers? Because of God's judgement that it's wrong to ignore the strangers in our midst. Why do we collect Christmas gifts for Seafarers? Because of God's judgement that it's wrong to only see people as a means to our own ends. God's judgement is always oriented toward the flourishing of all God's people.

We often see judgement as cause for fear. But for the most vulnerable in our society, for those who know violence and racism and poverty and discrimination and abuse and any other form of oppression, Malachi's promise of God's judgement is good news. It means there will be a day when there is no gap between the world God created and the world live in.

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The second theme we need to unpack is what or who exactly it is that is getting judged here. Part of the reason we're skeptical of judgement is because our judgements tend to be selective. Other people need to be judged. We need to be given a break. But for Malachi, everyone is subject to judgement. The sun of righteousness rises on everybody.

Why does this matter? Because it prevents us from locating the world's problems outside of ourselves. So often, the narrative we hear is that we could make life on earth as it is in heaven if only we got rid of certain groups of people.

But the line between good and evil doesn't run between people. It runs through each and every one of us. So the separation that Malachi talks about isn't really between us and some other group of people. It's separating the good from the bad in all of us. God's judgement strips away anything that draws us away from the love of God and love our neighbors. It strips away our hatred. It strips away our resentment. And to use Luke's image, it strips away our indifference. Is that separation easy? No. It's often difficult. It is easier to live as the world's saviors instead of God's redeemed people. But the judgement of God is the beginning of the path to life.

I know I've been throwing a lot of heavy concepts at you, so let me try to give you a practical example of how you can actually see these ideas play out. This is going to be way oversimplified, but you'll get the connections. Last Saturday, I drove past Temple Beth Rishon where they are having Saturday services, and they have a police officer station out in front. And they have a police officer out front, in part, because a week or so earlier, Kyrie Irving had promoted an antisemitic movie on his twitter feed. And the premise of this movie is basically that every problem that world has is because of Jews. And in addition to being historically inaccurate and relying on fabrications, it rests on this Manichean idea that all the problems in the world come from this one group of people. As if only one group of people needs to be open to judgement.

You might imagine that promoting an antisemitic movie would get you suspended or fined or at least condemned in a statement from the league. I'm old enough to remember when David Stern fined Allen Iverson for wearing baggy shorts. And instead, you got nothing for about a week. And why did you hear nothing? In part, because people didn't want to come off as judgmental.

Malachi tells us that when you put those two things together—a belief that judgement is only for some other group of people and an assumption that we have no capacity to judge right from wrong—it doesn't make the world more peaceful. It only means we ignore its injustices. You get a permission structure for people to air out their hatred and start making threats because it's been normalized. And you end up with Josh and Olivia needing somebody with a gun outside just so they can have services.

Malachi gives us an alternative vision of God's judgement. That when God sees evil and dishonesty and failures of justice, God judges out of love. God chooses to get involved. And God empowers all of us to do the same. God's grace not only enables us to be humble about our own shortcomings but to be hopeful that a better world is possible. Because God separates us from all that draws us away from love of God and neighbor, we can trust that even in our darkest nights, the sun of righteousness still rises.

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