

*“The day is coming.” “The day that is coming.” “The day when I act.” “The great and awesome day of the Lord.”* Are we seeing a theme here? God references this incredibly important day no less than four times in six verses. And when God repeats Himself like this, you better take notice. He has something important that he wants you to know.

*“The day is coming.”* As we enter these last days of the church year, with Advent just a couple weeks away, our lessons also focus our attention on last days as well. The end of the church year is a time for considering the end of the world. The end of this cursed creation. The end of these sinful, mortal bodies. And it's good and necessary that we do so. Because, otherwise, we can end up forgetting what God has in store for us.

That's what happened in the time of Malachi. Malachi preached to people who thought God wouldn't act. Their worship had grown corrupt. Their sacrifices were half-hearted. Their fear of the Lord had become a mere formality. And into that spiritual desert God speaks this clear warning: the day is coming.

God is patient. But don't confuse His patience with indifference. Don't confuse His silence with absence. Don't confuse his forbearance with forgetfulness. The Judge will come. The Lord will appear. The day is coming.

And every year around this time, our lessons bring us face to face with the day of the Lord. Not because God wants His people to live in dread, but because He wants us to live in truth. The truth that we dare not sleepwalk through life. Drift along with the world and its sinfulness. Fool ourselves into imagining that our sins don't matter or that God's justice won't ever arrive.

And so Malachi tells us: *“The day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble.”* When he uses the word “stubble” here, he isn't talking about stubble on your face, like a five o'clock shadow. He's talking about stubble in the field. The stubble of stalks of grain, chopped down with a sickle. We've got quite a bit of stubble around us right now, actually. Vast fields of dry corn stalks, chopped a foot off the ground, left in the field to be plowed under next spring.

And as any farmer will tell you, stubble isn't strong. It has no roots. It isn't durable. It's dry and brittle and easily burned. It's a dead, useless plant, waiting to be destroyed, so that something new and living can take its place. That's what it means to stand in opposition to God. That's what it means to refuse to repent. That's that it means to have no faith.

Without God's mercy, we aren't sturdy trees or firm foundations. We're stubble. And the fire of God's judgment is not symbolic or poetic. It's real. And on the last day, it will consume the stubble of this earth. *“Not a root or branch will be left,”* Malachi says.

I know, it's not a particularly happy message. But it's the truth. And a truth we need to hear. Because this sinful world can't last forever. Your sinful heart won't beat forever. Time itself won't continue forever. You need to hear it. I need to hear. This whole fallen world needs to hear it: Repent, because the day is coming.

Thankfully, however, there is a bright spot to Malachi's message. He doesn't leave God's people in fear without also giving us hope. God doesn't just speak of fire. He also speaks of light. And so He speaks a promise in Malachi's prophecy: *“But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness shall rise with healing in His wings.”*

No longer are we hearing about the heat of a furnace and the light of a blazing fire, but the warmth of a sunrise and the arrival of the dawn. No longer are we hearing about destruction, but the healing that will rise on the last day.

The day is coming. For the arrogant and evildoers that is a warning of judgement. But for those who fear God's name that is good news. That is great news. That is a message of hope and joy. That is like the coming of the dawn after a long, dark night.

Because the “Sun of Righteousness” is Christ Himself. Notice, he's not merely the sun who gives righteousness. He is the Sun of Righteousness. He is righteousness. It's what he's made of. Which means He's not merely the one who forgives your sins. He is your righteousness before God. His entire life shines with perfect obedience. It shines as brightly as he himself did at his Transfiguration. With a light that drives out even the darkest of our sins.

And so the last day is not something that we as believers need to ever fear. The Judge who is coming is the Savior who already came. The Lord who appears is the Lamb who was slain. The fire that burns the wicked is the same fire that burned away your sin on the cross. A fire that was poured out not on you, but on Him.

When the Sun of Righteousness rises, He brings healing because He's already taken the wounds. He brings life because He's already taken death. He brings righteousness because He's already taken your sin.

And so what else is there to do at his coming, but rejoice. “*You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.*” I reminds me of a moment a few years ago. My wife and I were driving through the countryside, down Hwy 5, I think. And she spotted some calves in a pasture playing together. Running around and jumping as high as they could. And she literally squealed, “Look! They're frolicking!”

That's the resurrection in a nutshell. It is a day for frolicking. Frolicking like a calf in a pasture. Singing like a Miriam after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. Dancing like David before the Ark of the Covenant. Shouting for joy like the shepherds in Bethlehem. Worshipping like the people of Jerusalem at the Triumphal entry.

But before the Sun rises, God promises another messenger. Before the day dawns, God sends a voice to wake sleepers and shake the complacent. “*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.*”

Jesus tells us exactly who this is: John the Baptist. He is the Elijah who was to come. He is the one who prepared the way. Why does God send John the Baptist before the great and awesome day of the Lord? Because he wants all people to repent. He wants sinners to be called to faith. He wants to gather people who fear His name under his healing wings.

John's message is still very much the message of the church today. Repent. Return. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight the paths. Turn your hearts back to the Lord.

You know, we think of Advent as a time of preparation... and it is. But we don't have to wait for Advent to begin preparing. And so today we have an opportunity for a sort of “pre-Advent”. A preparation for our preparation. Every Sunday near the end of the church year is a miniature John the Baptist moment: a call to turn while there is still time, to listen while the Word is still spoken, to receive the mercy that Christ still gives.

So how do we live as people who know that the day is coming? We live in repentance. Daily repentance. Honest repentance. Not glossing over sin but confessing it with humility. Letting it die in the waters of Baptism where your old Adam is drowned.

We live in remembrance. “*Remember the law of my servant Moses,*” God says. Not because salvation rests on our remembering or in keeping the law, but because His Word keeps us grounded, sober-minded, and alert. His Word humbles our arrogance. His Word exposes our idols. His Word prepares us for the dawn.

And we live in rejoicing. Not fear, not dread, not uncertainty, but rejoicing. Because the day that burns the wicked is the same day that rescues the children of God. The day that exposes sin is the day that reveals Christ. The day that shakes the nations is the day that gathers the saints.

The day is coming... and that is good news. Because that day is the day of Christ's return. And if Christ is your Sun, your righteousness, your healing, and your life, then you need not fear its dawn. Amen.