

# The Twenty-Third Sunday Sunday after Pentecost

November 13, 2022

**P:** In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

**C:** Amen.

## Scripture Readings

*Malachi 4:1-6*

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.

“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

*2 Thessalonians 2:1-13*

Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

*Luke 21:5-28*

And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” And they asked him, “Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” And he said, “See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is at

hand!' Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once."

Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.

"But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

"And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

## **Sermon**

Historically, one of the favorite ways of Lutherans to talk about the Bible is in terms of Law and Gospel: the Law of God shows us our sins, it holds up God's perfect standard against our imperfect, sinful behaviour, and it warns us to repent and believe before it's too late. The Gospel is the message of what God has done for us, His mercy and forgiveness for those who do repent and believe. I think that, outside of some familiar Sunday school stories, the Old Testament feels so inapproachable and hard to understand to so many people - but today I want to look at our reading from Malachi because, even if it's hard to grasp on the surface, it's a wonderful example of Law and Gospel for our faithful forebearers before Christ, and for us as well.

We begin with the Law: "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." When the ancient prophets talk about "the Day" or "the Day of the Lord," they mean pretty much what we'd call Judgment Day, the end times, the arrival of God's full justice and wrath. Here, the image is fire: a fire that sets the wicked ablaze to leave neither root nor branch; that is, they are utterly burnt up, a total cremation so no identifiable trace is left. It is absolute destruction.

Who are these people? "The arrogant and evildoers," but "arrogant" here is more than an obnoxious, prideful attitude; it's a word for people who are rebellious against God, who insist on their own way, who show sinful pride instead of Godly humility. These are unfaithful, unbelieving people whose lack of faith is demonstrated by their evil deeds.

Then there comes Gospel. "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts." These are people who do have faith and trust in God, and for them there is not destruction, but restoration; they are not burned down, but raised up. It all depends on faith: unbelief leads to destruction; faith receives healing and deliverance.

I want to make a side comment here as well: those who fear the name of the Lord, Malachi says, will tread the wicked down like ashes under their feet. But remember, he's just said in the previous sentence that it's God who will carry out this punishment. The believing people are not doing anything to the wicked; they are not taking God's role and God's job into their own hands to attack and defeat. God acts on their behalf, and once He has done so, His people are then free and unconstrained by the wicked, who are already reduced to ashes. There is dreadful wrath and unbearable punishment for these unbelieving evildoers, but God is the one who makes it happen, not other humans. This is one hundred percent consistent with what Jesus teaches us as well - "vengeance is mine, says the Lord."

But back to the Gospel here: the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. That's an odd image, isn't it? The sun having wings? I think that, at the most literal level, it's a poetic way of speaking about the sun's rays. But in English, we have a wonderful play on words, sun with a U versus son with an O. Because that's ultimately what this is talking about: Jesus, the source of righteousness who brings healing, life, and restoration to the faithful people of God.

The sun's light and warmth is what makes life possible on earth: if, hypothetically, the sun simply stopped shining and went out like a lightbulb, we would be unable to survive more than a couple of weeks. And likewise, Christ makes life possible: true life, born again life, eternal life. Even here in the Old Testament, we learn that the Judgment Day of the Lord is also the day of deliverance for His faithful people, the day of life and healing and salvation.

That makes the word "wings" make sense, as well - because in Hebrew, that word also refers to the edges of a man's clothing. It makes me think of the miracle of Jesus when the woman comes up to him in the crowd and touches the hem of his garment, the edge of the tassels that go back to the commandments of Deuteronomy. The Son of Righteousness appears in Galilee, and he literally has healing in the "wings" of his garments. The rising of the sun also reminds us that Jesus is indeed the light of the world, or John chapter 1 about the light shining into the darkness, or what Matthew chapter 4 says about the beginning of Jesus' ministry: "the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned." Even without that nice little English wordplay about the sun, we see clearly that this is about the coming of Jesus, the light of the world entering this very dark place and bringing with him healing and righteousness. More than that, it is in the very act of rising up that he brings healing! He rises from the tomb, from the dead on Easter morning, and brings life and restoration to us.

This passage is the very end of the Old Testament. In the way our Bibles are laid out, the very next verse after this is Matthew 1:1, the beginning of the Gospel about Jesus. Malachi was indeed the last of the Old Testament prophets; he wrote somewhere around 430 BC, the very latest element of the Hebrew Bible. The other books we call the Apocrypha that were written in between, such as 1 Maccabees, even make mention of the fact that there are no more prophets during that time. After Malachi writes these very words, there is silence from God. There is silence for four hundred years. And that silence is broken by the cry of a baby in Bethlehem.

Hebrews 1:1, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." The Word of God in the prophets' mouths all pointed towards and led up to the Word of God in the flesh dwelling among us. But

there's one more! "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes."

More than two dozen times in the New Testament, people ask about Elijah. Is he calling for Elijah? Is Jesus Elijah? They knew this prophecy very well. They knew to expect Elijah – and remember, he was taken up into heaven in that fiery chariot! There was no tomb of Elijah; he really could come back down the same way he went up. But Jesus tells us what this prophecy meant: John the Baptist, the one to prepare the way for the Lord by preaching repentance, priming the pump, the opening act for Jesus as he begins his ministry.

We're almost into Advent again; two weeks from today brings us back to that new season and new year of the Church. But this part, these last couple of Sundays typically look forward to those last days and that very last day, the Day of Judgment and the return of Christ. These "end times" Sundays help remind us about that truth, that while there may be a lot of time from our human perspective (roughly two thousand years so far), the time before this takes place is not unlimited.

Malachi says, "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel." Remember how God would have us to live. Remember His Word. The Law of Moses, the Torah, includes all the Word of God to Moses, not just the rules. And for us, the Word of God is even larger – it is all of the Old and the New Testaments. Learn it, and live in the light of it. Learn most of all from the words of Jesus in the Gospels, for he is the key that unlocks all of Scripture to be correctly understood. That is how we wait for the day that is coming. We live as God's children in faith and in the light of His Word. His will for us is good. And what is His will for us?

I would turn to the catechism for how well and simply that says it: "God's will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to keep God's name holy or let His kingdom come; when He strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die. This is His good and gracious will."

Jesus said, "For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he himself is Elijah, who is to come" – Elijah who "will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers." That day is coming, and it is coming soon. By the Holy Spirit and his command to love one another, may he truly turn our hearts to act in mercy and love towards each other and towards all people. In these last days, God has spoken to us by His Son, our leader and ruler Jesus. Now is the time to walk as His Children, remembering His Word, to truly be among those who fear his name and walk in his ways.

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Our Father who art in heaven,  
hallowed be Thy name,  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done on earth  
as it is in heaven;  
give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our trespasses  
as we forgive those  
who trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For Thine is the kingdom  
and the power and the glory  
forever and ever. Amen.**

P: O Lord, almighty and ever-living God, You have given exceedingly great and precious promises to those who trust in You. Rule and govern our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that we may live and abide forever in Your Son; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

C: **Amen.**

P: Let us bless the Lord!

C: **Thanks be to God!**

P: The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

C: **Amen.**