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The Lord will Come to His Temple

Malachi 3:1-5 & St. Luke 2:22-40

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February 2, 2020 – Candlemas

One of the things that strikes us as we read the story of the Lord and his people in the Bible is the stark and often discouraging contrast between expectation and reality. On the one hand we have amazing scenes of creation and deliverance by the Lord, we see a joyful people gathering in his presence to hear him speak, to receive his instruction, and to go off in hope and faithfulness. The Lord saves Israel from Egypt, he brings them to his mountain, his voice rumbles down, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” He establishes a covenant with them and they cry out, “All of this we will do!” And five minutes later they’re worshipping a gold calf and whining about how tough life now that they’re no longer slaves in Egypt.

But it was this way in the beginning. The Lord created human beings to live in his presence, to know his life, to be his stewards in Creation. And then we fell to the first con to come along. His goodness was all around us. Our very existence shouted of the goodness of God. But we doubted him and foolishly tried to become gods ourselves. It’s the human predicament. It was through Israel that the Lord embarked on his venture to deliver us from our rebellion and to set his creation to rights. And so you might think that Israel would do better than everyone else. You might. But you’d be wrong. Israel, it turns out, is just like the rest of humanity and fails miserably. Abraham and his children were to be light to the Gentiles, but Abraham lied to his Gentile

neighbours and was caught. Isaac did the same. Jacob...well...sometimes it seems like Jacob did everything wrong. But the Lord delivered Jacob’s descendants from Egypt. But hardly had he done so than they grumbled and fell to idolatry. Friends, that’s Israel’s story. Over and over the people failed to fulfil their end of the covenant. They sinned, they oppressed the poor, the priests were corrupt, they made alliances with their pagan neighbours, they practised idolatry. The Lord visited them with his discipline. The people repented and were restored. And the cycle would begin all over again. Over and over and over. All to highlight that the human heart is horribly broken, filled with sinful and rebellious desires. And to point us to the need for a Saviour who can take our rebellious hearts and, from the inside out, turn them back to our Creator, emptying out the hatred and filling them with love.

Israel went from bad to worse and then to worst. And yet through it all there was a remnant—always a remnant—who knew their own heart problem and who longed for the day when the Lord would come, himself, to set it right. That remnant is, maybe, best seen in the Old Testament prophets who spoke for Lord in Israel’s darkest days, speaking to rebellious kings and people who didn’t want to hear it. Prophets who, like Jeremiah, were persecuted for remaining faithful to the Lord.

Malachi was such a prophet. We know nothing of his personal life. We don’t know how he was received. We don’t even really know for certain if “Malachi” was his name or just a title. It means “my messenger”. But Malachi stepped to the fore of Israel’s story and spoke the word of the Lord in dark days. He was a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah, probably speaking a few short years before they began their project of reformation. He prepared the way.

In Malachi’s day, the people of Judah had returned to the land from their exile in Babylon. Jerusalem and the land around it were in ruins. The returnees had rebuilt the temple seventy years before. It wasn’t like the old temple. It was smaller and it wasn’t very fancy, but it was the temple and it stood in the middle of the ruins of Jerusalem. The people had high hopes when they returned. Rebuilding the temple was just the first phase of rebuilding the kingdom. Soon it would be great again, as it was back in the days of King David. The people were excited. They were filled with faith and hope. But none of that ever happened. The presence of the Lord—the cloud of glory that had rested on the ark in the most holy place of the old temple—the Lord’s presence never returned to the new temple. Jerusalem remained a ruin. The people struggled to even build a wall around it for their own protection. The little piece of land they had was barely thirty by forty kilometres. And gradually, over the decades, the hope of the people failed. Their religious zeal waned. They went through the motions of sacrifice, but they brought the Lord their second-best and their left-overs. They stopped tithing. And the priests, already tightening their belts as a result and afraid of offending, compromised with the people rather than calling them to renewed faithfulness. The people took advantage of widows, orphans, and sojourners and the priests took advantage of the people. The one bright spot is that they had finally set idolatry aside. They worshipped only the Lord. But they did so half-heartedly.

Through Malachi the Lord spoke:

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.
(Malachi 3:1)

The Lord calls his people to faithfulness. He will visit his people. At the heart of their discouragement was the temple to which the Lord had never returned. But the Lord promises he will come. The “messenger” of the covenant in which they delight, he will come. I’m not sure if this bit about delighting in the covenant was said with tongue in cheek or it may be that the Lord is pointing out that as much as these people love the covenant, they love it in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons. In verses 2-4 he says:

But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Everyone wants the Lord to come and set things to rights. But everyone forgets that we're all a part of the problem. We think it's the other guy—and it is—but it's just as much us, too. The Lord will come, but it won't be what these rebellious, corrupt, thieving, half-hearted-in-worship people think. The Lord will come, but not to judge the Gentiles. The Lord will come in judgement to purify his own. Malachi gives us a series of vivid images. The first is of silver in the crucible, heated until molten and then heated some more until the dross has been burned away and the silver purified. The second image is that of a fuller processing and cleaning cloth. In Malachi's day clothes were soaked in a mixture of caustic lye and then vigorously scrubbed and beaten to remove the dirt. This isn't the coming the people expected, but it's the coming they need—to purge the dross, to purge the sin, to purge the rebellion so that they

can be drawn back to the Lord. Only after being purified will the people be pleasing to the Lord.

The Church gives us this reading for the Epistle on Candlemas, the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple and the Purification of the Virgin Mary. Before we read the Gospel, we're taken back to those dark days when the people cried out to the Lord and when he promised to visit them—not just to save, but also to judge and to purify. Why? Well, the key lies in verse 2, where the Lord says, “the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple”.

It's hard to imagine that St. Luke didn't have Malachi's promise in mind when he wrote the words in our Gospel, in Luke 2:22-24.

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”

The *torah* stipulated that after the birth of a son, a woman was unclean for seven days. She was then confined for thirty-three days. When the forty days were over she was to travel to Jerusalem, to the temple, to offer a lamb and a turtledove. The lamb was a burnt offering—an expression of thanks—and the turtledove a sin offering. If she could not afford a lamb, two turtledoves would suffice, which is what Luke says Mary offered. She and Joseph, while not destitute, were among that class of people known as “poor”. This was also the time when Jesus was presented to the Lord in obedience to the *torah*. As we've read recently in Exodus, the firstborn belonged to the Lord. The firstborn of clean animals

were to be sacrificed. Firstborn sons were to be bought back—to be redeemed—with the payment of five shekels. And so the baby Jesus, just forty days old, having been circumcised as Luke notes in the preceding verses, was brought to the temple and presented to the Lord.

And in this act of faithfulness on the part of Joseph and Mary, the promises of God through the prophet Malachi were fulfilled. The Lord has come to his temple. And, as it turns out, it was “sudden”. No one expected him to come that day. In fact, after he had been carried away by his parents, almost no one knew. But God's promises were confirmed that day by two witnesses. Look at verse 25:

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God...

Even in Israel's darkest days, there was always a faithful remnant. In Luke's Gospel we first meet Mary's cousin, Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah—the parents of John the Baptist. Then we meet Joseph and Mary. Now we meet Simeon. This old man knew the promises of God and had never lost hope. That day, the Spirit moved him and, in faith, he went to the temple and saw Mary and Joseph there to present their little boy to the Lord. Luke echoes Malachi as he tells us that Jesus came to the temple. In describing Simeon he echoes Isaiah, who said, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me” (61:1). In Simeon's case, the Holy Spirit had

revealed to him that before he died he would see the Christ, the Messiah.

Mary and Joseph, obedient to the word and Simeon, obedient to the Spirit, converge on the temple and, as a result, something wonderful happens. When Simeon sees Jesus he bursts into song:

**“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in
the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people
Israel.”** (Luke 2:30-32)

As Luke’s description of Simeon is rooted in the language of Isaiah, so is Simeon’s song. And yet Simeon brings Isaiah’s hope into the present. He had been promised that he would see the Messiah before he died and so he says with absolute certainty: “My eyes have seen your salvation”. In praise he tells the world that he can *now* depart in peace. That “now” is loaded with significance. Simeon is saying that “Today’s the day. Salvation has come. Not tomorrow, not next month, not next year...salvation has come this day and now I can depart in peace; I can depart full of *shalom*. Simeon’s Spirit-given task—and it seems it was a life-long one—was to watch and wait like a sentry for the coming of the Lord to his people. Through long, dark years he waited. He knew the oppression of the Lord’s people by the Romans and by Herod. He knew the corruption of much of the priesthood. He knew the half-hearted religion of the people around him. Not much had changed since the days of Malachi. But this day, as he stood watch, he saw the light dawn in the darkness and he knew that the darkness would not overcome it. That day he was discharged from his duty. His song is a sigh of relief, tired after years of

watch, but full of joy, knowing that the Lord is faithful.

One of the many remarkable things about Simeon is that he has a much deeper understanding of the promises God had made through prophets like Isaiah. Most of the Jews were looking for a national deliverer—one who would re-establish David’s kingdom and set the Jews over their gentile oppressors. And as much as Simeon lived in hope of Israel’s consolation, the salvation he sees in this little boy, Jesus, he says, has been sent into the “presence of all peoples”. Yes, he has come for the glory of Israel, but he is Israel’s glory *because* he is a light for revelation to everyone else. Simeon was one of the few who understood Israel’s mission, going all the way back to Abraham. They weren’t to be the rulers or overlords of the gentiles. They were to be a blessing to them as they manifested God’s light. And here comes that light, incarnate in the Son of Mary, ready to represent Israel as God’s salvation is brought to all the peoples.

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph marvelled at Simeon’s words and that Simeon blessed them, which would have been a natural response on meeting the parents of the Saviour. But then, after his joyful proclamation, Simeon speaks more sombre words to Joseph and Mary:

“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” (Luke 2:34b-35)

In his song, Simeon had said that Israel’s consolation, her glory, would be a light to all peoples and if that’s true, it means that this child come to deliver is also going to bring conflict and crisis. Through Isaiah God had said on one hand:

**See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure
foundation;
the one who trusts will never
be dismayed.** (Isaiah 28:13, 16)

But on the other hand he had said of that same stone, also through Isaiah:

**[H]e will be a sanctuary;
but for both houses of Israel
he will be
a stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them
fall.
And for the people of Jerusalem he
will be
a trap and a snare.** (Isaiah 18:14-15)

As Malachi had warned: the coming of the Lord will not be what you expect. The Messiah, will lay bare the thoughts, the motives, the hearts of many. He hasn’t come simply as the Saviour; he has also come as Judge. There will be many, like Joseph and Mary and like Simeon whose faith will be built on the foundation of this stone, but many others—those looking for a Messiah to overthrow the Romans or the Herodians, those looking for a Messiah who will be connected with the earthly temple, those looking for one who will come in violence rather than peace; those looking for a Messiah to give them earthly power and authority—for all of them this stone will be a stumbling block. And so while Simeon rejoices at the salvation that has come in Jesus, he also reminds Joseph and Mary that this baby will also bring conflict and that he will be rejected by many. It will be as though a sword has pierced her soul—maybe a reference to the grief she will know at his execution, but almost certainly referring to the division he will cause and the rejection he will experience. Again, the Lord’s coming will not be what most expected.

There was another witness that day as the Lord came to his temple. Look at verses 36-38:

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The credentials of all these witnesses are important, and so Luke actually takes more time to tell us *who* Anna is than he does *what* she said. He wants to make sure we know that she's qualified to witness the Lord's coming in this little baby.

Anna embodies the ideal of a pious and holy woman. In fact, Luke draws on the language used to describe Judith. If Anna had been married seven years and then widowed for 84—which probably represents a better reading of the Greek text—and had been married at the usual age of 14, she would be 105 years old—the age at which Judith was said to have died (Judith 16:23). To remain a widow for so many years, never remarrying, echoed Judith too and was held up as a pious ideal. And like the great hero, Judith, Anna is devoted to the temple and to fasting and prayer. And yet fasting in that day was a sign of mourning. For someone to fast meant that something was wrong. And so Anna's abstinence—both her remaining a widow and her fasting—express her hope. Like Simeon, she was living in hope and expectation of the coming of Israel's consolation—or as she puts it, “the redemption of Jerusalem”—and she spent her time

fasting and praying, asking God to send his deliverer and to set right all the things that were wrong. And yet here, as the Spirit brings her to meet Jesus, like Simeon, she bursts forth into praise as well. Luke doesn't tell us what she says, but it doesn't matter; the point is that she recognised Jesus as the promised Messiah. Her praise certified his identity just as Simeon's did. Candlemas is the end of the Christmas and Epiphany season and with Simeon and Anna in mind, we could sing “Joy to the word, the Lord is come!” today just as easily as on Christmas Day.

Brothers and Sisters, Joseph and Mary and Simeon and Anna serve as reminders to us that as God's plans unfold, our response should be one of joy—a joy that leads to faith and a faith that leads to submission and obedience. God's purposes will be accomplished no matter how we respond. And that's where the danger lies. This is why Simeon foresaw conflict and crisis in Jesus' ministry. What the Jews wanted and expected wasn't the same as what God wanted or expected of them. This had been the problem since the beginning. God promises us his perfect goodness, but we don't trust him and we instead go off seeking what we *think* is good and we fall into sin. God had wanted for the Jews to manifest his glory to the world, but for much of their history, his glory was manifested not in his blessing them, but in his disciplining them for their refusal to follow him in faith. Jesus brought this conflict to its height as he called men and women away from their misplaced sources of hope; he called them away from power and authority, from pride and from money, and called them into a kingdom not of this earth and promised to create a temple not made with hands. And for disrupting the power-base of those who insisted on their own wants and expectations, Jesus was crucified. And yet even the cross was part of God's sovereign plan. Today it stands as a foundation

stone of redemption for many and a stumbling block of condemnation for many more. It points us back to Joseph and Mary, to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and to Simeon and Anna and their faithful response of joyful obedience and submission. Do we insist on our own plans and priorities and even our own ideas of who God is and what he's supposed to do for us? Or do we submit ourselves in faith to the God who reveals his faithfulness in his Son, who calls us into his kingdom through the “foolishness” of the cross, and who empowers us to live a new kind of life through his indwelling Spirit?

Let's pray: Almighty and everliving God, we humbly pray that as your only-begotten Son was presented in the temple in our human flesh, may we be presented to you with pure and clean hearts by the same, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

¹ Joel B. Green, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 151.