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“Hope Is Now” **Sermon on Malachi 4:1-2**

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Sometimes, Good News comes in strange packages. “This temple will not last. Nothing made by human hands will last.”

That’s what we read in Luke’s Gospel. And Gospel is Good News. “People will not like what or who you stand for. You might be arrested, or worse. They will dare you to speak. But, knowing this, don’t plan a speech ahead of time. Just wait until it happens.”

This certainly is some strange Good News. It’s nice that there isn’t any homework. “People will lie and try to sway your thoughts. They will be convincing, and you will think it is the truth. It’s not. And Bad things will happen. Earthquakes, sickness, uprisings, wars--well, you can imagine.”

“It will feel like the end. But it’s not. Not yet.”

That sounds rather ominous. But, still, it’s Good News.

In the midst of this Apocalyptic picture that Jesus is painting, he also says these things, “Don’t be afraid. I will be with you. I will even give you the words you need. Not a hair on your head will perish.”

Do you see? It is Good News, even though it comes in a strange package.

The Apocalyptic readings we find in scripture are so strange that sometimes we want to milk them for meaning or even attempt to parse out a pattern, a pathway, a point in time so that we can be ready, or so that we can fret about it or maybe to change our ways just in time? But, Jesus says, “Don’t do that.” Because, strange package or not, Apocalyptic messages are Good News. They are messages of Hope.

Yet, when we read them our imaginations tend to run away with us as we start to picture the worst we can possibly imagine—the End of the World as we know it. Which doesn't seem very hopeful. And the more imagination we put into it, the more frightening it can become.

Of course, if we listen to Jesus instead of our imaginations, Jesus gives us hope. The hope that no matter how many ways this world goes wrong—no matter how much we hurt each other on this planet—no matter how often people try to make their own way instead of following God's way—no matter what—God is at work. God is bringing about God's plans in big and quiet ways. God's Kingdom is Coming. And, in the end—God's ways will prevail. In the end—every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. That is how this World Ends.

When we can lean into this Hope, we can clearly hear Jesus saying, "Don't be afraid. I will be with you and help you through the trials of life. You are mine forever and ever. That will not change."

Jesus stands at the end of Time. This is our Hope. Of course, Jesus is also with us now. Hope Is Now.

Our second reading is another Apocalyptic message which offers Hope. There are only two verses in this reading, and those verses could not be more different.

Malachi 4:1-2.

"See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.² But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.

Two very different verses. The first verse speaks of a hot oven and a burning heat that consumes. All is burned to the ground—and then some—burned even through the roots.

The second verse talks about righteousness and healing that brings joy. Joy like leaping calves that have been let loose from the barn. Set free.

The first verse is Judgement. The second is Grace.

There is judgement for the arrogant and evildoers. And there is Grace for those who trust God. So, who is who?

It seems like there is a real temptation to assume that the people we don't like or who don't agree with us are the ones that will get burned to the ground by the Judgement of God.

One time, I was walking into the Zoo. And, just up in front of me, was a couple with their child in a wagon. They were upset about something or someone. Eventually, I heard one of them say, "Well, with the end of days coming, I guess they will have to accept their fate." It was Christian talk, apocalyptic talk—but it didn't sound hopeful. It just sounded like condemnation. It kind of sounded boastful as if saying such a thing brought satisfaction. "They are going to get what's coming to them." It bothered me. Of course, that may have just been a weak moment for those two. A moment when frustration overflowed. It happens to me sometimes, and maybe

you get it, too. But, after hearing it, I felt certain that isn't the way I am called to consider the end of days. There IS judgement in the Apocalyptic message. And, that judgement is not ours to wield.

Then, back in September nearly two months ago, there was a well publicized prediction that a "Rapture" was to take place. And, usually, when one speaks of a "rapture," it suggests that some people will be taken up into heaven and others will be—according to a fictitious and rather successful series of books—others will be Left Behind. I don't buy into all that imagery, but such talk does still stir up a bit of curiosity.

When I arrived at work that day, somebody said, "Well, it looks like we are all still here." Then, within a few seconds, somebody else walked up—not part of that conversation—and happened to be asking for JW—one of our incredible Sextons. "Has anybody seen JW?" And, for a second, I felt like I was holding my breath for a long time. JW. Who sits with his Bible open on the coffee table in the parlor several days a week? That JW? Where is he? Is he not here? You know...not here. The timing was too perfect and those of us standing there started to laugh. Of course, JW walked up soon enough. But there was a moment. I mean: If I ever happen to be in a field and it is just me and JW—or I happen to be grinding grain, and it is just me and JW—out of the two of us? Well, I might be in trouble.

But we are not talking about "rapture"—and neither did Jesus. We are talking about the power of Apocalyptic language. There is judgement and there is grace. This is not an "either or" pairing. Judgement is not for some and grace for others. Rather, just as Christians can rightfully claim that the Grace of Jesus Christ is extended to us, it is also necessary to recognize that Judgement is also for us.

We are sinful. And, whether we like to admit it or not, we are also doers of evil. Our choices do not always reflect faith in Jesus Christ. Our harsh judgement of others is a way of putting ourselves in God's place. A form of self-idolatry, an act of arrogance. And these are just the broad brushstrokes of why the Judgement of God rightfully falls on us. There are so many ways that we fall short as individuals. And there are ways that we fall short collectively whether as the church or as a part of the larger society. Of course, we are called to confess all of this. And in confession we can receive grace.

The Malachi passage begins with calling out sin. And it ends with a celebration of grace, which sounds a lot like what we do in our worship service each week. After we have entered into worship with praise and prayer, we take time for confession. It is an opportunity to be honest with ourselves, with God, even with each other. It is a time to submit to the rightful judgement of God and to truly seek forgiveness. And, as we proclaim each week—that forgiveness is given to us. It may come in a strange package—a time of talking about individual and shared sin out loud, in unison—it really is a strange package. Even so, it is Good News: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. This is truly good news. This is grace.

Yet, Malachi, with its talk of burning and consuming—even with its talk of grace—it seems to point to something at least one step beyond confession. In chapter three of Malachi—just before what is our text for today—Malachi speaks of the Refiner's fire. A fire that may appear to consume—when actually it is pulling out the impurities—and transforming.

In the refinement of metal, fire is used to transform the metal. The metal is completely thrust into the fire so that the metal is heated to a very high temperature—just the right temperature to separate the impurities out of the pure metal. As the impurities are pulled away,

the metal actually becomes stronger and better able to serve its purpose—whatever that may be.

This is the power of fire in the hands of the refiner. And this is the power of judgement in the hands of God. God's judgement is meant to refine us—transform us—so that we are stronger and better able to serve our purpose. God's purpose. And, in order to do that, we have to be willing to be transformed by God's Judgement. Asking forgiveness for when we know we have sinned is an important part of responding to and receiving God's Grace. And, in that Grace, we can find the courage to lean into Judgement so that we can be forgiven and transformed—changed by Christ and ready to serve Him.

Which is all about Good News. We are called to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. Good News does come in Strange Packages. I feel like this is a moment when Donovan would point at all of us and emphasize what strange packages each of us is. I can hear him saying, "I mean just look at around." Good News can come in Strange Packages. And thank God!

Within the Apocalyptic message is Judgement, there is grace and there is hope because Jesus stands at the end of Time. Jesus is with us now. Hope is Now.

This is how we can learn to submit to the Judgement of God—the refiner's fire that transforms and strengthens us to share Good News. Because Jesus is with us we have the grace and the hope we need to stop turning judgement on each other. To stop looking for others to blame for how difficult and terrifying and unjust this world can be. And, instead, lean into God's judgement for ourselves that guides us to share Good News—to live as a people who know and follow Christ. Who see that there is hope for tomorrow and all of life's tomorrows because Jesus stands at the end of time. Friends, this is really the only way we can get through this life faithfully. We cannot do it by ourselves. We cannot do it divided. We can only do it together.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells a wonderful story about an older woman she knew who was born in 1894. "The newspaper headlines changed a lot over the course of her lifetime. When she was born, there were no airplanes, no televisions, no automobiles to speak of. Russia was ruled by a czar and China by an emperor. The only way to get to Europe was by boat.

As she got older, her short term memory got worse, but her long-term memory got better, and one day she shared a story about a summer's day from her childhood, when she and some of her girlfriends hitched up their long skirts and climbed Mount Washington in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. They went too far and stayed too long, she said, and before they knew it the beautiful sunset they were watching had turned into a foggy dusk so they could not see their hand in front of their faces.

No one had a flashlight. Flashlights had not been invented yet. And no one knew for sure which way was down, but they agreed they would all hold hands and that they would not, under any circumstance, let go of one another. So that is how they did it—one girl at the front, picking her way down the mountain one step at a time—and all the rest of them strung out behind her, holding onto each other's wrists so that they made a living human chain. Every now and then someone would want to argue about which way to go, and the others would listen, but what none of them did was let go.

“Sometimes,” she said, “all I knew of the world was the hand ahead of me and the one behind. Sometimes, my arms ached so badly I thought I would cry aloud, but that is how we made it at last. We found our way home by holding on to one another.”

May God bless us as we trust in the gracious presence of God who transforms us so that we can cling to Christ and to one another as we move through this world of confusion, trusting that our hope is in Jesus who stands at the end of time.

And is with us now. Amen.

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