

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, December 22, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MALACHI 3:1,2

“Behold, I send My messenger to prepare the way before Me, and the Lord Whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple.... But who can face the day of His arrival; who can stand when He appears? For He is like a blazing fire refining precious metal, and He can bleach the dirtiest garments.” (Moffatt and The Living Bible)

WHO CAN STAND CHRISTMAS?

With Malachi, we ring down the curtain on Old Testament prophecy. He was the last of the prophets whose messages have been recorded for us, and lived in the half century between 500-450 B.C. He forms the bridge between the Old Testament and the New.

His message quite definitely is predictive in nature, and our text this morning quite clearly speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ: “Behold, I send My messenger to prepare the way before Me, and the Lord Whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple... But who can face the day of His arrival; who can stand when He appears? For He is like a blazing fire refining precious metal, and He can bleach the dirtiest garments.” We know that this refers to Jesus because in Matthew 11:10 and in Luke 7:27 John the Baptist is identified by our Lord Himself as “the messenger to prepare the way before Me (i.e., “before Jesus”).”

Malachi’s message points clearly to the New Covenant sealed in the blood of Jesus. It is altogether fitting, then, that this prophecy should conclude the books of the prophets, and immediately precede in our English Bible the New Testament, or the New Covenant.

One of Norman Rockwell’s delightful illustrations in the old Saturday Evening Post pictured a salesgirl in the toy department of one of our great stores. The date on the calendar is December 24, and the hands on the clock point to 5:05 p.m. The poor girl has slumped over a pile of toys behind the counter, her dress askew, her hair disheveled, her arms limp at her sides. She has slipped off her shoes, and her eyes are rolled back as if she were about to breathe her last. She has just made it through another great American Christmas!

I think we all know how she feels. There are moments when we look back nostalgically to our own marvelous childhood Christmases, to which the toys are a tribute; but the mad rush and crush and bustle catches up with us, and we ask, “Can I stand another year of it?”

There is, however, a far deeper significance to the question: “Who can stand Christmas?” Quite apart from the customs that have grown up around the celebration of Christ’s birth, the question must be asked about that event itself: “Who can stand before the birth of Jesus Christ?”

In Malachi, this last book of the Old Testament, the prophet asks a searching question: “But who can face the day of His arrival; who can stand when He appears?” The covenant

people, Israel, were looking with longing eyes for the coming of their Messiah, the mighty Deliverer Who would rescue them from their enemies and free them from their distresses. The children of Israel were utterly impatient for God's miraculous intervention to take place. But Malachi poses his question in order to warn, in order to set back on their heels, those same self-righteous Israelites who thought themselves quite ready for the day of deliverance.

The people to whom the question in our text was directed were exiles returned from captivity in Babylon, the remnants of God's chosen people, restored, by God's promise, to their native land, and to the city of Jerusalem. But they found the walls of the city and the ancient temple in ruins, the land desolate and filled with enemies. They had to rebuild with a trowel in their hand and a sword in their belt for fear of those enemies (Nehemiah 4:18). When the wall was repaired, and the temple foundation restored, their shouts of joy were mingled with weeping. Compared with the former city and temple, the restoration was very second rate. "How does all this fit in with the promises of God's deliverance, and of the glorious reign of the Messiah?" they asked.

Malachi heard their murmurings as they cried out to God, "Do You really love us? Where is the God of justice?" (Malachi 2:17). "If God has really chosen us, when will He judge our enemies and deliver us? Will Messiah never come?"

And Malachi answers them with the Word of the Lord! Listen: "The Lord for Whom you long will come suddenly. Oh, He's coming all right! But who can face the day of His arrival; who can stand when He appears? For He is like a blazing fire refining precious metal, and He can bleach the dirtiest garments."

The answer to their prayer would be dreadfully more than they had asked for. They wanted the Deliverer to come mainly to free them from their troubles. But the coming One was the Lord indeed, and He would come, not to play favorites on their terms, not to fulfil their dreams of national peace and prosperity, not to establish their kingdom. He would come to bring peace through judgment, to deal not only with the sins of their enemies, but with their sins also. Could they stand His coming?

Now I want to suggest that if Israel was guilty of a superficial view of the significance of Christ's coming, so are we. We talk and sing of the coming of the Prince of Peace to earth. We become choked with emotion as we listen to the story of how He came, and how there was no room for Him except in a stable.

For that matter, it is easy for us to miss much of the poignancy and pathos of the story. For example, we are told by word and picture that Mary arrived at the inn on a donkey, but there is not a word in Scripture about any donkey. It is quite probable that the couple from Galilee were too poor to afford the luxury of a donkey.

You remember the old music hall ditty, "Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do," and those two lines:

"It won't be a stylish marriage,

I can't afford a carriage...."

Maybe Joseph couldn't afford to rent a donkey. Could you imagine what it would be like for Mary to walk the 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem? There is pathos for you. It is so easy to become sentimental about the coming of the Christ Child.

I'm sure we all have a favorite Christmas carol. I know I have, and it is

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down His sweet head;
The stars in the bright sky looked down where He lay,
The little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.

There is surely no hymn which gets so close to the heart of Christmas. And yet, when this glorious Christian hymn is crooned by some contemporary entertainer, the message of the Incarnation can be degraded into something revoltingly maudlin.

But I wonder, can we really stand Christmas? Are we really prepared to embrace all that the coming of Christ means and involves? Look at our text:

"Who can face the day of His arrival; who can stand when He appears? For He is like a blazing fire refining precious metal, and He can bleach the dirtiest garments."

Have you ever visited a foundry and seen the fierce light, and felt the intense heat of the roaring fires which separate the precious metal from the crude ore? The Living Bible translates the remaining portion of our text, "He can bleach the dirtiest garments"; but Moffatt's translation more literally follows the Hebrew, "He is like the acid used by fullers." Now a "fuller" is a textile worker who "fulls" or scours or cleanses and thickens new cloth by removing the native grease from it. And he uses acid to do this; and we know how acid burns if it comes into contact with the skin.

Now "fire" in Scripture speaks of judgment. Scripture assures us that Jesus Christ will come again, that there will be a "Second Advent"; and we invariably associate His second coming with the judgment, when, as Matthew 25:32,33 indicates, the "sheep" will be separated from the "goats," and each individual will be consigned to his final destination,

But we must remember that our Lord's first coming is also associated with judgment. The New Testament clearly affirms that "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 13:17). That is to say, God's desire is to save rather than to condemn. But the fact is that His very coming into the world -- by His mere presence amongst us -- He judges and condemns us. Jesus Himself, in that same third chapter of John's Gospel, said, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (verse 19).

Jesus called Himself "the Light of the world" (John 8:12). What does light do? It reveals.

It shows things up which otherwise would remain hidden. For example, there is always dust in the air we breathe. But fortunately, we don't often see it. But on an autumn afternoon as you stand in your living room, suddenly an oblique shaft of sunlight, a band of intense light from the setting sun, shines in through the window, and stabs the atmosphere; and what do you see? In that band of sunlight, you see millions of specks of dust floating about in the air. The light reveals them!

And because the light reveals, it condemns. It shows us what should not be there. That is why some people will have nothing to do with Christianity. The life and teaching, the death and resurrection of the living Christ shows them up for what they are, and they can't stand to be exposed. And remember — even if we are professed disciples of Jesus, He is still constantly judging and subtly condemning us by His very presence. That is why a sincere Christian often has a deeper conviction of sin after he has been converted than before. Christ is incarnate Purity, and I am impure. He is eternal Love, and I so easily lose my cool, or am insensitive to the needs of others. He never thought about Himself, and I love to play it safe, and put my own interests first.

Because Jesus is the Light, He reveals to us how far short we fall of what God wants us to be. He murders our silly pride. Because He came to earth and is amongst us, He shows us up for what we are. This is why Bethlehem and judgment are inseparable; and this is what gives the cutting edge to our text: "But who can face the day of His arrival; who can stand when He appears?" The prophet Amos (5:18,19, Good News Bible) expresses the same truth very pungently when he exclaims, "How terrible it will be for you who long for the day of the Lord! What good will that day do you?... It will be like a man who runs from a lion and meets a bear! Or like a man who comes home and puts his hand on the wall - only to be bitten by a snake!"

Malachi, in the preceding chapter, has just reminded the people of their own transgression against the law of God, and of their blindness to their sins of selfishness and ingratitude; and when he hears them express a desire for the coming of the "Deliverer," he cannot but remind them that the One in Whom they express delight will, when He comes, deal realistically and drastically with their sin.

And this is surely a salient word of warning to us also. What about my inmost heart -- the part of me that others cannot see, "the darkened cells where passion reigns within"? Christ sees and knows. He is the Light, and He reveals, and thereby condemns. A respected Church elder suddenly ran off with another man's wife. Everyone was flabbergasted that he could do such a thing, until one day, in a closet in his home, his wife found a stack of pornographic magazines. People seldom take the downward path all of a sudden. They toy with temptation. They come to enjoy their wrongdoing until it hardly seems to be sin any more. They lurk in the darkness until their eyes become blind, like those fish which swim in the inky darkness of the Mammoth Caves of Kentucky. If we are as wise and as humble as we ought to be, we will say with St. Paul, "Be careful. If you are thinking, 'Oh, I would never behave like that' -- let this be a warning to you. For you too may fall into sin" (1 Corinthians 10:12, Living Bible). If it hasn't happened to you -- remember -- it could.

Jesus Christ has arrived, and in His presence the baseness and the evil of the human heart

is shown up in their true colors. Confronted by the living Christ, we see ourselves as we really are, and when we do, there are only two courses open to us:

- we must either get rid of Him; or,
- we must get rid of every unworthy thing in our life which His presence reveals and condemns.

God doesn't wait until the final Judgment Day to show us what we are. Every day is, in fact, a Day of Judgment. The Light has come! That is why Christmas is inexorably connected with judgment.

I remember the sense of shock I experienced when I first learned of the preaching schedule of the old medieval preachers during the four Sundays of Advent. They invariably preached each year during Advent on these four subjects: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. Just imagine preaching on "Hell" on Christmas Sunday! And yet those old divines had gotten hold of something. There was no trace in their preaching of the sickly sentimentalism we often associate with Christmas today. After all, hell is the inevitable destination of those who, knowing full well that the Light has come into the world, nevertheless continue deliberately to love the darkness rather than the light. Hell is the inevitable judgment upon those who trample underfoot the blood of the Cross.

So you and I, not only at Christmas, but every day we live, must ask this personal question, "In which group do I stand?" Am I amongst those who love the light, or am I one of those who love the darkness? Those who love the light are not perfect people; they invariably acknowledge and lament the fact that they fall far short of what God would have them be; but they are sincerely committed to Christ, and honestly want to be delivered from everything that is out of harmony with His will for them. Those who love the darkness are those who, even though they may profess to be religious, nevertheless say "No" to Christ, because there are base things in their lives which they love and which they will not give up. I ask again -- to which group do you belong?

In His first coming our Lord was Himself consumed by that "blazing fire." He Who is our Judge bore in His own body and soul the wrath of divine judgment when He suffered on the Cross, for only by making that supreme sacrifice and paying that awful price, could He save His people from their sins.

But Christ, the sin-Bearer, can never be indifferent to sin. He judges our sins already, just because He is in our midst; but in His second and final coming that work of judgment will be completed. Listen to His own words in Matthew 25:31-34, 41: "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on the right and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father, take your inheritance, the Kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world'... Then He will say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared

for the devil and his angels.” Jesus said that.

The coming of Christ is the coming of the King of Righteousness Who will by no means clear the guilty; and how shall we stand before Him if our lives are corroded by thoughts, deeds, motives and prejudices which are diametrically opposed to everything He stands for?

Who is sufficient for these things? Who can stand such an appearance as this -- the coming of God Himself to establish His rule of perfect righteousness over the life and thought of His people? We say we want Christmas, but do we really? Do we want what Christmas inexorably demands from us?

Let us each year celebrate Christmas but let us welcome His coming for what it is -- a judgment upon our lives. Our King has already come and summons us by His grace to enter the Kingdom where He is sovereign, the Kingdom in which He desires us to serve Him with joy.

Let us submit humbly to His refining, cleansing work. We know on the authority of Holy Scripture that “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” in His sight (Isaiah 64:6). Therefore, let us claim, by faith, the perfect righteousness of Him Who always did those things that pleased His Father. So may we truly welcome His coming, not only at Christmas, but always and everywhere; and may we sing with new meaning,

“Joy to the world,
The LORD is come!”

AMEN.