Christ the Priest **Malachi 3:1-4**
Trinity CRC, December 8, 2024 AM Rev. Richard deLange
Advent—Prophet, Priest, King

Malachi 3 **1** "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.
2 But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. **3** He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, **4** and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

Dear people of God,

Do you need a priest? That might not be a question you've thought about before? If you grew up in a religious tradition that has priests, you might have considered it. But in our tradition, we have pastors, elders and deacons. The word priest is not common and we don't have that as an "office" of the church.

Last week Pastor Tomas mentioned that we all need a prophet in the form of Jesus. Do we also need a priest like that? The short answer is yes. But do we really understand that about Jesus?

Role of Priests

Well, let's consider, first of all, the role of priests as Malachi describes it here. What should a priest do? A priest is a middleman. He stands between God and the people. He's the one in the Old Testament who offered the sacrifices ***of*** the people ***to*** God. He offered sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. The regular Israelites could only come so far and the priest filled the gap. The high priest just once a year could enter the holy of holies, the dwelling place of God. There he made atonement for the sins of the people and interceded for them with the LORD. But the rest of the year, day to day, the regular priests offered sacrifices for sin and for thanksgiving to the Lord.

In our Malachi reading, the Lord takes special aim at the priests for their failures to be servants of God and his people. Instead of drawing the people closer to the Lord, they are leading them away. In chapter 3:3, Malachi tells us that the Lord will be a refiner and purifier of the Levites. And the Levites are the priests, the priestly tribe of Israel. Malachi says that they fail to bring offerings to the Lord in righteousness. This is the charge the Lord brings against his appointed priests for judgment.

Here's the kinds of problems we find. If you scan the book, you see what he means by this failure. The unrighteousness God speaks of looks like this:
In chapter 1:6 the Lord says,

> Mal 1:6 *It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name.*

How? Well, in the next verse he says, "You place defiled food on my altar." He explains: You bring blind, crippled and diseased animals for sacrifice. Instead of the best, you bring the worst. And the priests bless this contempt, this disregard for the Lord that the people show.

Then in chapter 2:7 the Lord cites another problem:

> Mal 2:7 *"For the lips of* ***a*** *priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth.* ***8*** *But you (priests) have turned from the way (which is the Lord's way) and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,"*

The tribe of Levi or the priests are basically calling bad good. Causing people to fall away from God—stumble in that sense—because they disregard the way. They dismiss the way of the Lord as outdated or unnecessary. The way of the world is just fine. God doesn't require righteousness. Just live how you want and do what pleases you. Do as the nations around us do. No need to concern yourself with what God says.

Chapter 2 goes on to illustrate this, telling how the priests bless unholy marriages with no regard for God's desire for a people who are marked by holiness. Instead, they bless the serving of idols from the nations around them. In turn, they also allow unholy divorces and violence among their people—violence often being oppression of the poor and weak, as noted in chapter 3:5, where it includes defrauding workers of their pay, oppressing the widows and orphans and depriving people from other nations of justice.

Also in chapter 3, the Lord talks about how the people are robbing God by withholding their offerings. Like with bad sacrifices, they are not honouring God's name by giving him their first and their best. And the priests endorse this.

In these ways, the priests have *shown contempt for God's name*. They have allowed God to be dishonoured. They are NOT marked by righteousness; their life and their message does not call people to honour God and glorify his name. No, they encourage unrighteousness among the people. So, they are drawing people away from the Lord instead of drawing them nearer.

Therefore, this book is a judgment or a warning of coming judgment for those who don't take the holiness of the Lord seriously: who disregard his word of truth, his good way for our lives.

You see, the Lord Almighty, our covenant God, calls us his own and then he freely gives us what we need to know in order to live a blessed life. That's such a gift. You see, he wants his children to enjoy life to the full, as we heard recently from the book of John. But we can't find that life if we think we can live our own way. We must not be like the priest of old who disregarded God's good ways for his covenant people. It's

clear that they didn't really know how wonderful the Lord is and that's why they didn't care what he said. They were very poor mediators or intercessor between God and his people. Poor examples of the priestly nation God expected Israel to be (Ex. 19:6).

In line with that, I think, I was deeply saddened when I recently read a media post by some of my colleagues advocating a new book about the widening of God's mercy. These sorts of teachings always have an element of truth in them. Of course we need to be merciful as God is merciful. And, of course, we fail far too often. However, the teaching suggests we can predict or safely assume that God is moving in a certain direction, even beyond what he has revealed to us in his Word. That's the dangerous part. Half lies are harder to detect than an outright full-on lie. Picking some passages from the Bible and dismissing others in order to say that God blesses things that he never sanctions in the Bible is what's happening. It's an attempt—well-meaning, I think—but it gets us to move in the direction our world is pulling us, particularly on ethical and sexual matters. I won't get into that now except to recall the warning we just heard from Malachi 2 which is still important in our day:

> *Mal 2:7 For the lips of **a** priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth. 8 But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble.*

We have many voices today advocating things that are outside of God's prescribed way for his people to live. It may sound noble to think that God's mercy is ever-expanding, but how can we improve on what our merciful God has clearly revealed? That's ludicrous. Such voices, Malachi tells us, will cause us to stumble.

Malachi also warned the people and the priests not to dishonour God by giving him less than he deserves. The Lord deserves our firstfruits, not our leftovers. Would we treat a royal guest to anything less than our best? Of course not! Yet the priests in Malachi's time were offering sick and half-dead animals to the Lord instead of the unblemished. They were, likewise, withholding their offerings for the Lord—robbing him, God says in chapter 3. But indirectly they rob themselves of the blessing God adds to us when we give freely and joyfully of the best we have. They are robbing themselves of life to the full, as Jesus called it. That's abundant life in some translations. In today's language, that means giving to God first is the pathway to fullness. Not seeing what you have left at the end of the month or the end of the year and then throwing the leftovers God's way. An offering of faith shows that we trust God to provide. Giving at the end shows we are trust ourselves to take care of ourselves. Trusting God includes putting him first. In reality, we distance ourselves from God when we don't trust his Word and won't put him first in our finances or any other part of our life. This was the error of the priests in our text. By their words and actions and the actions of the people that they endorsed, they were not drawing people to the Lord but pushing them away and creating a greater chasm between heaven and earth.

The Right High Priest

Now, secondly, we need to see **that**, where the priest of Malachi's day failed and led the people astray, the Lord was faithful. He promises to raise up a messenger. We read in Malachi 3:1,

> *Mal 3:1 "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.*

Now, interestingly, Malachi means My Messenger. So Malachi is a messenger from the Lord who is calling out the priest of Judah and Israel for their unfaithfulness and for leading God's people astray. That is the message from the Lord. That's the message of coming judgment in that time.

The further and future fulfilment of those words is clearly a reference to Jesus, for whom John the Baptist cries, "Prepare the way of the Lord." John points to the coming of Jesus the good and true Messenger of God's covenant and the High Priest of God Almighty. Jesus is the One and the only One who can fulfill the covenant God made with Israel and that Israel repeatedly failed to live up to. John declares that Jesus is Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And Jesus, through his words and actions, proclaims our need for his priestly, forgiving work. This is the Messiah that Judah and all of Israel need.

This is the Messiah **WE** also need. Malachi says **to** Judah of old, "Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come into his temple." So, the people were expecting him; he's the one they are seeking. But they didn't really know or understand **what** they were expecting of him. For while the tribes of Israel seek the messiah, they usually saw him as only a political conqueror or hero. Meanwhile, they needed a Saviour from sin which separates us from God. They needed a priest to unite them with the Lord, their covenant head. They need a true high priest. And so do we.

The shock of Malachi's words is that this person will not just come suddenly but will come with judgment—like a refiner's fire. He's said to come to purify the descendants of Levi, the priests, until they present offerings to their covenant Lord in righteousness, says v.3. And v.4 seems to indicate that this will be righteousness as in former days, likely referring to days when Israel was wholeheartedly devoted to the Lord.

The point is that when the high priest comes who reconciles us to God, he does that by becoming the sacrifice for our sin. The Heidelberg Catechism speaks of Jesus as "our only high priest who has delivered us by the one sacrifice of his body." Jesus is the one who consumes human impurity like a refiner's fire removes impurities from metal. Then as this metal comes out of the fire, it is reshaped into the image desired by the metal worker. And people are similarly cleansed and reshaped into the image of God, an image of righteousness. We all know the pain and heat of this refining work that Jesus sometimes does in our lives. It comes in love and is a gift to us from Jesus alone—our right and perfect High Priest.

Our Priesthood

That brings us to think about our role as priests today. We need to understand that we are reconciled to God through the priestly work of Jesus alone. But then we are called to be priests in this world. In Exodus 19:5-6, the Lord says through Moses,

> *Ex 19:5b Although the whole earth is mine, 6 you* (that is Israel) *will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*

The book of Malachi is a call to the whole nation to step up and be the kingdom of priests and holy nation they are supposed to be. This is why God redeemed them. In New Testament language, the people of God are a light to the world. And Israel was the same. Our roles as priests points the world to Jesus and his reconciling work. We serve as agents of his reconciling work.

Based on what we've already heard from the book this morning, it seems that our role as priests has a few implications.

First, is what we're doing right now. We're worshiping. We are a worshiping community. In our worshiping together, we are proclaiming our faith in Jesus as the great high priest and mediator between us and God. We declare our dependence on him alone for salvation and our complete confidence in him to lead and guide us into holiness as our high priest and even refine us to that end. Each time **you** pull out of your driveway to come to worship on Sundays, your neighbours—if they know you—will know that you're off to declare your dependence on Jesus, our great High Priest.

In the same way, we live by God's Word so that the world can see we have no other Guide than Jesus. We trust in him to save us; and we trust him and his inspired Word to direct us. We trust the Word and the Holy Spirit to work together in us to shape us, to refine us, to sanctify us more and more into a holy people who walk in God's way, not our own way or the way of the world. In Malachi's day, God's people were following the way of the nations, instead of the Lord their covenant head. That destroyed their witness in the world.

In a few words, we live knowing that Jesus is coming again. The One who first came as a baby in a manger to serve and save us is coming again to rule and judge according to what we have done with him and how we followed his way for us.

Knowing this, thirdly, we live in anticipation of his return, seeking to give him our lives in grateful devotion. Or as Paul puts in Romans 12: *we offer our lives as living sacrifices to God*. As mentioned in Malachi, this shows in giving God our best. We come to worship Jesus like the Magi from the east and we bring him our worship which includes our hearts surrendered to him and his desires. It includes lifting our voices to praise him, our humble and exalted Lord. It means giving our best gifts, our firstfruits not the leftovers, to advance his glory and his kingdom.

Outside of our worship gatherings, it means we live with others in mind. We live to serve as priest in our homes, seeking to bring healing and peace in relationships. We serve as priests in our workplace, ensuring our employees and coworkers are treated respectfully, not mistreated in how we pay them or forcing them to do work that we

ourselves wouldn't stoop to. Not bad mouthing our employer, instead of working to help him or her succeed. In all of life, we remember our High Priest who said he came to serve us.

We also serve as priests by looking out for those whom Jesus called "the least of these," including the widow and orphan, the poor and the weary, those who are being deprived of justice, as Malachi points out (v.5). As a church, we do those things together and we can do them separately. But together, we ensure that our deacons have funds to assist the needy and help ensure that the poor are treated justly.

We care for the hurting in our midst and beyond as best we can. In recent weeks, I've heard glowing testimonials of how our church family has been so supportive of those who are grieving and going through hardships. That's so encouraging to hear. I know we don't do it perfectly but I'm so glad to hear that you are being priests in how you care for one another.

That need seems to continue around here. We have just learned about the death of our troubled brother George. I'm thankful for those who were able to reach out to him in love over the past months. And those who have quietly and tenderly supported Edith over the past months and will undoubtedly continue to do so in the future. Your priestly love is deeply felt and appreciated.

The Lord continues to put opportunities before us to be a royal priesthood. He continues to call us to be a holy people, who in word and deed declare the praises of Jesus. We live for him in service to others because he is the one who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

We live now for his glory. Not for self-advancement or recognition. It's because we needed a priest. And Jesus came to be that for us. We celebrate his first coming in Advent. And we know that he'll come back. In the meantime, we live like him—serving—so that that the nations may see him through us and welcome his refining and transforming work for the world.

Amen