

Sermon for Sunday, December 5, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"ARE YOU READY FOR CHRISTMAS?"

Text: "For behold, the day comes, 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."
Malachi 4:1

(Explanatory note before reading Scripture: Before the day of Malachi, the people of Israel had been captive in Babylon. When at last they were freed and permitted to come home, excitement swept their ranks. Permission to re-establish their nation in Palestine seemed to them the beginning of the glorious messianic age. The nation was surely on the verge of recovering the vanished glory of the days when David was king. The land would become fruitful, the rains would fall when needed, the population of a depleted people would increase until the land could not hold them, and all nations would come to serve them.

But somehow things had not worked out that way when they returned from Babylon. Reality is often different from dreams and so it was with the Jews. In the first place, only a few of the Jews returned from Babylon. Second, the area of land given to them was hardly larger than the destroyed city of Jerusalem. What land they had was rocky and unproductive. They had hoped to rebuild the temple, but it took all of their efforts just to keep body and soul together so the work on the temple languished. Even the walls of the city were not rebuilt for over ninety years. Sometimes the rains failed to come so that drought and famine followed. A spirit of dull depression gripped the people so that cynicism and impiety gained ground. In chapter three of Malachi the people ask, "What is the good of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts?" Even the priests conducted services of worship with indifference and failed to give proper religious instruction to the people. So, as we read the book of Malachi we find certain abuses in their lives. But, says Malachi, God will act again as he has always acted. And on that day, says the prophet, God's mighty act will separate the good from the bad, the sinner from the saint.)

Our text for this morning is rather somber. It says that the day is coming when those who are ungodly will be destroyed. It says that there is going to be an event in history that will separate the sheep from the goat, the good from the bad, the saint from the sinner. That act was to be the birth of Jesus. Verse one, our text for this morning, tells us what will happen to the ungodly. Verse two tells us what will be the reaction of the godly. "But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall." The writer goes on to add, "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." Yes, "On the day when I act..." With that thought the book of Malachi comes to a close and the Old Testament comes to an end. Then, for 450 years the Jews waited for the day on which God would once more act. In centuries past he had always been faithful to his word. They knew he would act. He had acted to call Abraham out of Ur and began a new people. He had acted to call Moses; He had acted at the Red Sea; He had acted at Jericho; and always when his people were in need God had acted. Now they waited for that day when he would act again.

It is on that note that the Old Testament ends--it is a note of expectation and hope, a note of confidence that God will act once more. And the real question according to

the prophet is whether people will be ready for the mighty act of God. Some 450 years were to go by but one day God acted as he had promised. One day a man named Joseph knocked on a door in the little city of Bethlehem. Men still were not ready and there was no room in the Inn. God's act was a little child whose name was called Jesus as the Angels had instructed. Of those who were not ready for God's act, some tried to kill Jesus as a child, others despised him and rejected him, others ignored him, and finally there were those who crucified him. Still, God had acted. He had kept his word. And all men stood judged--either to be judged righteous or to be condemned. In this Advent season we are getting ready to celebrate once more the mighty act of God. This morning I want to raise the same question that Malachi raised almost 2,500 years ago--are you ready for God's act, are you ready for Christmas?

Now, I am not asking you if your shopping is done or your Christmas cards addressed or your dinner planned or your guests invited. If none of those things came off it would still be Christmas. No, I am asking are you truly ready for your life to be judged afresh by God's mighty act in history, the giving of his only Son. Are you really ready for your life to come under the scrutiny of God. We ought not to march starry-eyed and tinsel-draped towards Christmas humming "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" if we really don't mean it.

One of the problems Malachi saw in his world was the way people conducted their business. Are you ready for Jesus to look at your professional life? For example, if Jesus sat beside your desk each day, is there anything in your business life that would need changing? And to push the needle of the question down into the quick, are you ready to make any necessary changes? Isn't this the question that faced Zacchaeus when Jesus came into his life? He was an important man in Jericho. As a tax-collector he had grown rich off the fat of the land. But when Jesus came into his life some adjustments had to be made. He had to restore what he had taken dishonestly--with interest! In addition, he had to share his wealth with the less fortunate. Or see how it worked in the life of Matthew. He had to give up his occupation in order to follow Jesus and that's quite an adjustment. Whatever your business and however you conduct it, are you ready for Christ to examine it?

Another problem in Malachi's day was the homelife of the Jews. Marriage was held in disrespect, divorce was commonplace, children deceitful and disobedient, the people married women from among the heathens, and the home was generally in disrepair. When a nation's homes are failing that nation is on the verge of collapse. Are we ready for Christ to come into our homes? Is there anything there we would want to change? Would we have to start family prayers and Bible reading? Would we have to change the way we treat our children? Would we have to change the way husband and wife act towards one another away from the eyes of the world? Yes, are we ready for Christmas--ready for Christ to come into our homes and see how we relate to one another and how we really live?

Another problem Malachi had in his day was the way people used their finances, particularly in relationship to God. As we read Malachi we discover that the people offered polluted food on God's altar, that they promised to sacrifice their best animals but instead offered one that was blind or lame or blemished or sick. Malachi said to them, "If you present that sort of gift to your governor, would he be pleased or accept it from you?" And then he added, "Cursed be the cheat who... sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished..." Well, are we ready for Christmas if it means God is going to examine our check stubs? How many of us are willing to let God discover that we spent more on vacation than on church, that our nation

spends more on dog food than world missions, more on cigarettes than on Christian education, more on movies than on evangelism, more on liquor than on Christian service, more in the beauty parlor than on human poverty.

Look how it worked in the life of the rich young ruler. He wanted all the benefits of religion--he wanted the sort of spiritual security and godly blessings that Jesus could give him. But he wasn't ready for Jesus to come into his financial life. When Jesus told him that his money stood between him and God and the only way to get to God was to get the money out of the way, the Bible says he went away sorrowing. But that's the way Jesus works. If he can't be number one in our lives he refuses to be number two. Yes, are you ready for Christmas if it means that Jesus gets to go through your check stubs?

There is one other problem that Malachi found in his day--it was the relationship of God's people to the temple. He warned them that God would judge them. He said that the pagans worshipped better than the Jews! (1:11) How about us--are we ready for God to judge our religious lives? I have a little book entitled, "When You Come Over." It is written for Roman Catholics who are joining the Protestant church. In one place the author writes, "the true Protestant supports a church. No man can be a Christian alone: he must be as much to the fellowship of Christians as a vein or a tendon to a body. A strong Christian leader of early times put this very rigidly: 'there is no Christian outside the Church.'" The author goes on to add, "A Christian..who is out of the praying fellowship and who habitually absents himself from the worship of God is a very strange kind of Christian."

If you subtract the children and visitors from our congregation, how many would you guess are in church on a given Sunday? If you guessed less than 35% you would be close. If the Bible is true when it says that Christ is in the midst of the worshipping church where two or three are gathered together in his name; if it is true that the Holy Spirit comes in a special way to the gathered people of God; if it is true that God speaks especially through the word as it is read and preached; if it is true that something for the soul is available at church that we can get nowhere else, then why do the attendance statistics damn us with their testimony?

Yes, are we ready for Christmas if it means that Jesus gets to go over our time schedule that shows how much time and effort and energy we devote to the welfare of our souls?

Malachi knew that the God who had acted would act again. From where he stood he knew that God's act would come in judgment on the world. Some would be condemned and others would be blessed by God's mighty act. Some would be ready, some would not. Today is the second Sunday in Advent, the time in which we look forward to the celebration of God's mightiest act, the giving of his own Son. Some are ready--ready to be judged by God in every area of their lives. But some are not. Are you?

Back during World War II many of us hung a little red and blue flag in our windows. On the little flag would be a white star for every person from that home who was in the service. Sometimes one of the white stars would be changed to gold. It meant that somewhere a loved one had paid the supreme sacrifice for his country. During those years the story is told of the little boy and his father walking down their street on Christmas Eve. At each home they paused to count the stars in the windows of their neighbors. As they walked along they came to a vacant lot. Through the

gap in the houses the black velvet of the night spread across the wide expanse. In rapture the little child stood captivated by the scene of magnificent splendor before him. At last on that Christmas eve he whispered, "Look, daddy, there's a gold star in God's window tonight." Yes, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son...." and there is, indeed, a Gold star in the window of God. Are you truly ready for Christmas? If you are not ready now--when will you be?