

Sermon for Sunday, November 28, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor  
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"WHEN IT'S TIME TO BE SCARED OF GOD"  
Malachi 4:1-6

"But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing  
in its wings..." --Malachi 4:2a

In our visits to the Holy Land in the last two years, there has been one thing in particular that has astonished me. As we talk and question the Israeli guides and visit in the homes of the nationals, we discover that Israel is basically a-religious. By that I mean they do not practice their religion. Like many Christians, the only times that they go to synagogue is on a special religious celebration once or twice a year. I feel a very deep concern about this, particularly in light of the constant danger that Israel lives under. You see, they are God's chosen people. God has never un-chosen them. And the New Testament tells us that before the end-times, they will have another chance to accept Jesus as Messiah. But the point is this: because they are God's people, God has always expected a great deal of them. Throughout the Old Testament they fall away from God time and time again--and time and time again God punishes them. When they ignore God, when they fail to worship him, when they fail to be obedient to him, God's wrath falls upon them. If there is any one consistent fact in the Old Testament, it is God's punishment of his people when they disobey him and do not worship him. For that reason, one would think that the Jews would have learned something from their own history. Yet, today in Israel they are basically a-religious. I cannot help but believe that God's wrath and punishment will fall upon them. Today Israel needs to fear God. Today Israel needs to tremble before a righteous God. As God said to them of old, he still says today, "I will not withhold my anger forever."

Israel was not ready for the Messiah when he came--they are not ready for Messiah today. And when they have been religiously unprepared, the judgment of God has always fallen upon them. For that reason I do not have a great deal of confidence about the long-range future of Israel. Our text for this morning says, "But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings..." But they do not fear the name of the Lord.

One of the most moving scenes in all of Israel today is Masada. Masada is a sort of butte--a mountain cut off flat at the top. It lies in a barren, desert area of Israel, far below sea level next to the Dead Sea. There in that desolate place, high atop Mount Masada, Herod built a fortress. Through an ingenious system, he managed to trap all of the water in the area during the annual rainfall of about two inches and bring it into huge cisterns cut into the sides of Masada--some of them almost big enough to run a train in. Even though Masada might be besieged for a period of years, the water would be adequate. Then on top of Masada, he built a magnificent fortress with storehouses holding enough provisions for an army to be able to endure literally for years. The sides of Masada are so steep that on the little trail that has switchback after switchback as one works his way to the top is so narrow and difficult that a warrior loaded with his armour could never successfully get to the top and be in condition to fight. Besides, they could come only one at a time and would be most vulnerable. In about 72 A.D., when the Jews had rebelled against the mighty forces of Rome, as Jesus had said they would, and when the temple area had been leveled so that not a stone stood upon a stone, the last handful of rebels retreated to the Dead Sea and there took their refuge on Masada. They had plenty of food and water to last them indefinitely and their fort seemed impregnable but the Romans were determined to wipe them out. Imagine this mountain going up and on its flat top this gigantic fortress. The Romans took slave labor and began a landfill. Tons upon tons of dirt were brought in until the landfill

reached all the way to the top. Then the Roman instruments of war were taken up that ramp to the walls of Masada and the battering rams began their devastating work until they had breeched the walls just as night fell. The Roman troops withdrew to come back in the morning to take Masada but that night every Israeli soldier went to his own home and there he took the life of his own family. Then the men gathered together and they drew lots until ten men had drawn lots--and they have been found up there, incidentally. Those ten men then took the lives of the other Israeli soldiers and then they took their own lives. The next morning the Roman legions stormed up the landfill, poured through the breach, only to find a deathly silence. Today as one wanders through the ruins of what was once a great and mighty fortress, as one views the remnant of what was once a beautiful haven, he is impressed with the tragic fall of such a place. Today many of the Israeli soldiers and pilots go to Masada and there in the ruins of that fort, they take their oaths to the armed forces of their country. They swear, "Masada shall never fall again." But Masada fell because the Jews had turned from God. Masada fell because of the wrath of a righteous God who always had and always will punish his own people when they turn from him. Masada will fall again if they do not fear the name of the Lord. As our scripture for this morning began, "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."

Today is the first Sunday in Advent when we begin to look forward to the birth of Messiah. He is that sun of righteousness that Malachi talked about. Do you think that God, who never ignored or overlooked the sins of Israel, will overlook our sins today if we do not fear him? I have a deep concern about America today. It is true that among a relatively small group of people I see an exciting spiritual renewal going on. Yet, for the great body of Americans it is not so. As we look back in history we are compelled to believe that God brought Christians to these shores and here he established a nation that has become great and mighty; he has blessed this land with an abundance of milk and honey. But as this nation turns more and more from God, as this nation turns more and more towards socialism and towards the initial stages of atheistic communism, as this nation more and more ignores its spiritual heritage and spiritual roots, do you think God will long endure? When a people have been blessed of God and then turn from him, his wrath has always fallen upon them, his righteous judgment has always come upon them. Is there any reason to think that God will ignore the sins of America, their godlessness, their sin, any more than he will ignore the sins of Israel?

It is time in this great nation of ours to fear God. Our text for today says that if we fear God the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. If ever a country needed healing it is ours. But such healing does not begin in a country unless it begins first in individuals. The question I would like to ask this morning is this: are you ready for healing in your life? Are you ready for Messiah to come?

Are you ready for Christmas--for Jesus--if it involves a reappraisal of your professional life? That is, if Jesus sat beside you each day as you worked, is there anything in your business life that would need to be changed? Wasn't this exactly the question that faced Zacchaeus? When Jesus came into his life, some changes had to be made. He had to restore what he had taken falsely and with interest. In addition, he had to share what he had with the poor. Again, when Jesus came into the life of Matthew--or Levi, as he is sometimes called--he had to make some changes. As a tax collector his professional life was put under the scrutiny of Jesus and he had to make some changes. Or, are you ladies ready for Jesus to come into your housework, your kitchen, and see how you spend your time and energies? Are there any changes you would want to make in how you do your job if Jesus were your companion?

Or how about our home life? Are we ready for Jesus to come into our homes and see how we live? Some of us have little plaques hanging in our homes that read, "Jesus is the head of this house, the unseen guest at every meal." If that is true, are there any changes we need in the way we relate as husband and wife, as parents and children? Are there things we do as a family we would want to stop if Jesus were there? Are there any things we would want to start doing--such as Bible reading, family prayers--if Jesus were there?

Then how about our friendships? Are our friends the kind of people we would want to introduce Jesus to? Are the things we do with our friends, the times we spend with them, occasions we would want to invite Jesus to share in and be a part of? Has your own life so influenced your friends for Jesus that they would say to him, "We have heard so much about you we feel we know you already"--would they say that?

Or what about our financial lives? Would we be willing to sit down with Jesus and have him go over our check stubs to see how we have used our material resources? Would we be willing for him to know we spent more on a vacation than we did on the church or on helping others? Would we be pleased for him to know that our bill at the club was many times over our pledge to the church? Isn't this what happened to the rich young ruler? He wanted all of the benefits of religion--he wanted the sort of spiritual security he felt Jesus could give him. Yet, he was not really ready for Jesus to come into his financial life. When Jesus said for him to give up all he had and come follow him, he simply was not ready for that.

Again, what about our spiritual lives? Are we willing for Christ to examine our time record and see how much time we spend in prayer? Are we willing for Jesus to check the amount of Bible reading we have done, the study of God's word that we have done? Are we very eager for him to know how we have remembered the Sabbath day to keep it holy? Are we ready to show him how we have ministered to others, cared for their needs, reached out to them in compassion in their times of trouble?

Today is the first of the four Sundays in Advent. It is the beginning of the Christian liturgical year. And it is the only time in the church's calendar when we celebrate a time when Jesus has not yet been born. As we begin the church year again, are you ready for Jesus to be born into your life? Are there changes you need to make? You see there are two times when a Christian ought to fear the Lord. First, we ought to fear him when we are not living as we know he wants us to live. There are many of us today who need to fear the Lord, to fear his righteous wrath, his dreadful judgment, for he will not hold his anger forever. Second, we ought to fear the Lord when we need healing in our lives. Do you need healing--spiritual healing--in your life this morning? Are there deep hurts, deep wounds in your heart? Is there unhappiness and failure, is there brokenness, in your life? If you fear the Lord, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.

Back during World War II, every home that had given a father or a brother or a son or a husband to the battle for freedom had hanging in its window a little red and blue flag with a white star for every man from that home who was in the service. Most of us remember those little flags so well. And we remember too, how some of the white stars were changed to gold stars, representing a life that had been given when word came from the front that a loved one had paid the supreme sacrifice. During those years, one Christmas night, a father and a little boy were walking down the street. The little fellow was captivated by the stars in the windows of the homes. As they walked along, there came a gap in the houses, and there, over a vacant lot, the black velvet of the sky spread across the wide expanse. In rapture the little child



