

Malachi 4:1-6

Advent 2, December 10, 2023
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"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³ 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. ⁴ "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. ⁵ "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

Several years ago, when we were living in Florida, I'd seen a news article that an FBI Most Wanted bank robber was believed to have been located in Lakeland, FL, which was just the next city over from us. The man in question was one Myron Ernst, who had been released from prison that August, and then proceeded to rob eight banks in Florida and Alabama, which landed him on the FBI Most Wanted List. And, well, when I read that, my mind jumped to fantasy pretty quickly. I started studying his photo thinking that the next time I was in Lakeland, I was going to be on the lookout and be the one to place that crucial phone call to the FBI.

You can probably guess, I was not involved in his eventual capture. And one day, I saw the headline, "FBI Nabs Most Wanted List Bank Robber in Lakeland," and my first thought was, "Good. Glad he got caught." And I'd imagine *most* people's reactions to that headline were the same: "Good riddance. He's getting what's coming to him. Glad he got caught." When someone breaks the law, it's a good thing when they're captured. It's better they pay for what they've done than that they run free on the streets. We like it when justice is done.

But I sure am happy that those types of thoughts don't cross over into spiritual matters. For instance, I'm glad that none of *us* would ever rejoice that an unbeliever will get what's coming to them in hell. Or *do* we rejoice at that type of thing? Do you sometimes find it a joyful consolation that some wicked person in your life will face God's wrath on Judgment Day? If any one of us were to claim that we'd never had these thoughts, that we've never quietly taken solace in the idea of someone paying in hell for what they've done—I think each one of us would be lying.

Dear friends in Christ, this really should not be the case. Sometimes we *do* quietly rejoice that other people will "get what's theirs" in hell. But Jesus does *not want* this to be the case. In fact, Christ wanted so much for this *not* to be the case, that He was willing to pay the ultimate price so that it might not happen. We'll keep that idea in mind as we consider the theme:

God's Great and Awesome Justice

- I. Sinners will get what's coming to them
- II. Christ got what was coming for sinners

Our text for today follows on the heels of a great deal of complaining by the people of God in Malachi's day. Their complaints? "Why doesn't God love us?" "Why are evildoers prospering?" "Why

is God allowing the evil people in the world to blaspheme Him and ignore Him and get away with it?" In other words, the complaint was, "Why doesn't God repay evildoers with what they've got coming to them?" And our text is God's answer. He assures the people that there *is* a great and awesome Day of the Lord coming, a day described as a great blast furnace. God describes those evil people as stubble that will be burned up on that day, reduced to ashes, stomped under the feet of the righteous.

And you have to wonder what the reaction was from those complainers who first heard these words! God was giving them exactly what they'd asked for! What do you suppose they looked like as they listened to this proclamation? Smiles? Hugs? Shouts of glee? A satisfied solace knowing that the wicked would get what was coming to them? How do *we* react to these words? We know how we *should* react. We *know* that we should **"desire all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,"** (1 Timothy 2:4) just as Jesus does. We *know* that we should be *saddened* by the fact that there are countless millions blindly charging their way to eternal hellfire. We *know* this, but is that how we really feel? *Is* that how we really react?

I would guess that we all, at times, *desire* this type of destructive judgment for wicked people. I would guess that to be the case, because those feelings are a tale as old as time among the people of God. For instance, do you remember Jonah's reaction to the people of Nineveh repenting? God had told Jonah to go and preach to the people of Nineveh, warning them about God's coming destruction. And after taking a rather roundabout route to that city, Jonah finally preached the message, and the people repented! We're told that **"a fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth."** And then, **"When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it."** (Jonah 3:5, 10) Mission success for Jonah! That was a clear victory for God, a moment to rejoice with thanksgiving for the Prophet Jonah! Except . . . that wasn't his reaction, was it? Instead, the very next verse reveals Jonah's thoughts: **"It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry."** (Jonah 4:1)

Well, that was about 2,800 years ago, *surely* we've learned a few things from Jonah's poor example, right? We all know Jonah was in the wrong! But the *disciples* didn't learn from it. In fact, we know there was a time when Jesus and His disciples were traveling to Jerusalem, and they sought to find a place to stay overnight in a Samaritan village. We're also told that the people in that village would not receive them. And do you know what the disciples said? James and John stood up and offered, **"Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"** (Luke 9:54) Lord, can we make sure that these *evil* people get what's coming to them? But instead of rebuking that Samaritan city, Jesus turned and rebuked James and John for their hateful attitude.

When we see people that are outrightly evil, defying God, flaunting their sin and their sinful lifestyles, are we more prone to pray *for* them, or to just talk *about* them? Are we more likely to speak with them and *warn* them, or perhaps, with a sense of smug superiority, do we just think, "Keep it up. One day you'll get what's coming to you"? Will evil people get what's coming to them? Yes, absolutely, that's what our text is about. But *who is it*, exactly, that will be on the receiving end of this blazing inferno, being turned into ash and trampled?

The first verse of our text tells us that it's not *just* evildoers, or those who we might rightfully expect to receive God's judgment. Rather, it says, **"The day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the**

arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble.” If this is your mindset, if you quietly rejoice that evil, wicked people will burn in hell—if you find solace in the fact that unbelievers will get what’s coming to them—then there’s no other way to describe that mindset than pure arrogance. It is arrogance that causes us to withhold sharing God’s Word with people that really need to hear it. It is arrogance that does not truly desire all people to be saved but is rather just fine with the idea of many suffering in hell. That’s arrogance. And God’s message to arrogant sinners like you and me is that *we’ll* get what’s coming to us as well! Because in **God’s Great and Awesome Justice**, sinners will pay dearly.

Well, thanks be to God that He sent One from heaven who did not come here to merely *talk* about sinners, nor to *joke* about sinners, not to engage in a sense of *smug superiority* regarding sinners, but rather to *die* for sinners. This is the One who, though He was very God in His nature, did not count equality with God as something to be latched onto and held onto firmly, but rather humbled Himself, *emptied* Himself and took the form of a servant. Being born as flesh and blood human, He was obedient to the point of death on the cross, a death reserved for murderers and truly wicked people. On that cross, He got *not* what was coming to *Him*, but **what was coming for you and me**. And on that cross, in His suffering and death, Christ Jesus was set ablaze with God’s wrath; Jesus was trampled to ashes as a result of **God’s Great and Awesome Justice**. He received the *very thing*, that God tells us was reserved for people like us.

Now, *why* is this a text that we’re considering in Advent? Doesn’t really strike me as the type of cheerful looking-forward-to-Christmas text that we might want this time of year. Well, let me ask you this: *are* you looking forward to Christmas? I’d guess that *most* of us probably are, it being the most wonderful time of the year and happiest season of all and all that. But that’s not the case for everyone. Some can spend these days filled with feelings of dread. Dread over the finances taking a hit during the holiday season, dread over having to spend time with extended family, stress over getting the house ready for company—so while many are looking forward to Christmas, not all are.

And this Advent season, we’re looking forward to Christ’s coming, not just as the Babe in Bethlehem, but also as the Savior who will return on Judgment Day. And this text reminds us of how two people can look at that great and awesome day with totally different reactions. For many, it’s fear and dread—and rightly so, as the judgment God describes in this text is terrifying! But for us, though we *do* deserve that same fiery judgment, through Jesus that great and awesome day will be more like this: **“For you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”**

I love that cow imagery. You know, there’s not a whole ton of cows that I’ve seen in these parts, but back where I come from, we have lots of cows. You probably know I’m from Wisconsin, and that state is really built on the back of the dairy industry. Now, for years, the California Milk Advisory Board ran their television ads with the slogan, “Happy cows come from California.” And many of those ads would make Wisconsin the butt of the joke, which I didn’t really appreciate. The commercials would often depict Wisconsin cows standing chest-deep in snow, and then the scene would cut to show happy looking cows in the green hills of sunny California.

Now, I’d like to set the record straight on behalf of Wisconsin dairy farmers; cows aren’t left outside during the winter. They’re kept in the barn during the cold months, cooped up in their own stalls and

kept there until the winter is over. And you have *never seen a truly* happy cow until you've seen the barn doors first opened to let the cows out in spring. The cows don't just walk out, they will actually *run* out, leaping and jumping and kicking and galloping. Seeing the green grass for the first time in months and feeling the warmth of the sun once more on their backs. When you've seen a herd of cows leaping together, rejoicing in the warmth of the sun, then you've seen a happy cow.

And what a wonderful picture that is for us! For we know what we deserve. We were kept cooped up in the barn of our sinful nature, unable to get out, trapped by our guilt and awaiting God's fiery judgment, the day when we would rightfully be turned to ash and trampled. But because Jesus took what was coming for us, because **Christ got what we deserved**, we have been set free! Like cows feeling the warmth of the sun for the first time in months, we have stepped out away from God's wrath, having instead the warmth of God's righteousness shining on us. He lifts His face upon us and is pleased. We have peace with God. And for *that* reason, we can leap and rejoice this Advent season. We can look forward to Christ's return, because on that great and awesome day, we will be reunited with the Lord.

Now, as we conclude, I want to look at verse 5: ***"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes."*** The Elijah that God promised to send was John the Baptist, a prophet who declared God's Law, bringing sinners to repent in preparation for their Savior. This Advent season, God sends *you* out to tell others about the hope that is in you, to share the reason why we are able to be so joyful around Christmas. You can tell others about how *you* were dead in your sins but have been made alive together with Christ.

So rather than rejoicing that sinners will get what's coming to them, let's rejoice in this: that we will not get what's coming to us because Christ already took that on Himself. And further rejoice that God would now use you to share that same message with others. Thanks be to God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.