Malachi 4:1-6 2001

 [[1]](#endnote-1)“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the Lord Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them. [[2]](#endnote-2)But for you who revere My name, the Sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. [[3]](#endnote-3)Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,” says the Lord Almighty.

 [[4]](#endnote-4)“Remember the law of My servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

 [[5]](#endnote-5)“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. [[6]](#endnote-6)He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

 You can do the math; it’s easy this year. Three (and a half) weeks from today. As the Lord said through the last Old Testament prophet, “**Surely the day is coming.**” It will be here soon. It is as if He is saying, “Ready or not, here I come!” So we have the last words of the Old Testament for our preparation today. These are the last and greatest words from God about Christmas.

 His parents both worked, so he didn’t get to see them very much. On top of that, they were very busy with other interests outside of work. So what did he want for Christmas? More than anything else, he wanted time with his parents. He looked forward to some relaxing time with them. Instead, they bought him a big present, and then left for another party. Instead of his parents, he got a thing. Would anyone be surprised if he just put that thing in the garbage?

 King David did something similar once, before he became the king.

**At that time David was in the stronghold, and the Philistine garrison was at Bethlehem. David longed for water and said, “Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!” So the Three [mighty men] broke through the Philistine lines, drew water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem and carried it back to David. But he refused to drink it; instead, he poured it out before the Lord. “God forbid that I should do this!” he said. “Should I drink the blood of these men who went at the risk of their lives?” Because they risked their lives to bring it back, David would not drink it. Such were the exploits of the three mighty men.** 1Chr11v16-19.

I confess that David’s action here has mystified me. Perhaps the explana­tion is just this, that the water tasted terrible to David because of what it meant, just as a Christmas present can seem terrible if it is just buying off a person.

 There are two ways to celebrate Christmas, or two kinds of people who celebrate Christmas. The Lord describes them through Malachi in no uncertain terms. He helps us to see the people around us and ourselves clearly in this way.

 The Lord says, “**Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire. Not a root or a branch will be left to them.**” This is like the woman who was there when the gates went up on Black Friday. She managed to get a shopping cart, but then the crowd behind her pressed on her and she fell head first into her shopping cart. She was spotted by the media later leaving the store empty-handed, and they interviewed her. She was very upset, not because she had gotten scratched up by her fall into the shopping cart, but, as she said, “I didn’t find anything I was looking for in the store!”

 For many people, the day they are expecting and the day that is actually coming are two completely different days. The day that is coming is the Lord’s day, and those who do not honor Him that day and these days are wrong to think that they can claim that day or these days for themselves. The Lord describes that day as a day of fire. One woman clearly proclaimed that Black Friday was her day for shopping, and don’t you dare try to take it away from her, or she’ll pepper spray you, too. But the Lord is not affected by pepper spray. He is offended by those who reject Jesus.

 Enough about those who receive coals in their stockings; let’s turn to the other side. “**But for you who revere My name, the Sun of righteous­ness will rise with healing in its wings.**” I have trouble reading that the Sun of righteousness will rise with healing in **its** wings, because I want to say that the Snn of righteousness will rise with healing in **His** wings, since it is so clearly a reference to Jesus. He is the Sun of righteousness; He is our Sun of righteousness. Putting wings together with the sun in the sky, we should understand the rays of the sun, like the rays of Jesus’ love for us.

 This is a beautiful illustration which can comfort us year-round. Every time we see the sun, even when it is glinting off of new-fallen snow, we can be reminded of Jesus, our Sun of righteousness. A couple of our hymns use that name.

Hail, the heav’nly Prince of Peace!

Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!

Light and life to all He brings,

Ris’n with healing in His wings. (CW61v3)

To hail Thee, Sun of Righteousness,

The gath’ring nations come;

They joy as when the reapers bear

Their harvest treasures home. (TLH106v2)

Christ, whose glory fills the skies,

Thou, the true, the only Light,

Sun of Righteousness, arise,

Triumph o’er the shades of night.

Dayspring from on high, be near;

Daystar, in my heart appear. (TLH359v1)

He heals us with forgiveness for all our sins.

 The Lord continues, “**And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.**” He means to say that we will rejoice, even if the illustration is not completely clear. The picture in this translation is of a calf born over the winter, always confined to the barn where it is warm. Then in the spring it is released for the first time into the open air and leaps for joy. It has been five and a half years now since I delivered a conference paper on this chapter of the Bible, and I researched this sentence rather thoroughly. It literally says that you will go out and do what a calf of the stall does. The verb that is used here is used three other times in the Old Testament with three different meanings, so there is no certainty that it means to leap. On top of that, the phrase, “calf of the stall,” is used several other places in the Old Testament, never referring to a newborn calf, but rather to what is translated as fattened calf. The picture there is of an animal that is confined to the stall so that it doesn’t move around and so that its meat does not become stringy. Either way, the Lord is describing our rejoicing when our Sun of righteousness comes for us.

 The Lord continues, “**Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things.**” These are words of strong contrast to what we so often see around us. Even though the Lord is on our side and His promises are even better than gold, it often seems that we are the ones being trampled, that we are the ones whom the crowd of shoppers are beating down, stomping us into the floor of the store. So the Lord renews His promise to us that the Sun of righteousness really will come for us, and we really will rejoice.

 The Old Testament actually ends with these words from the Lord, “**See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.**” The important question here is who is Elijah? Elijah had been a prophet of the Lord many centuries before the prophet Malachi. Elijah is the one who met the 450 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel and defeated them with the Lord’s sure and certain promises. Elijah was also the prophet who became very discouraged and thought that he was the only believer left in the entire world.

 Jesus later informed His disciples that the Elijah spoken of here was John the Baptist. It was not that God would send the actual Old Testament prophet Elijah, but that He would send someone like Elijah to do important work similar to Elijah’s work. The angel Gabriel had made all that clear to John’s father, Zechariah, even before John was born,

**Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.** Lk1v13-17.

We still turn to words about John the Baptist each year at this time of year, so that John can still do his work of preparing us for Christmas. John proclaimed God’s law, and then pointed people to Jesus. John made people followers of Jesus through the washing of holy Baptism. John still does his work on our hearts, so that we welcome our Sun of righteousness and rejoice in Him.

 This year again, there will be two kinds of people at Christmas, those who reject the Savior and try to take His place themselves, and those who rejoice in the Savior God has sent. May we “**revere His name**” this year and these days by honoring our great Savior. Amen.

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