

## “I Will Send My Messenger”

Malachi 3:1-4 • Luke 1:68-79 • Philippians 1:3-11 • Luke 3:1-6

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason, Michigan

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We don't talk about Malachi very much. In our three-year cycle of readings, excerpts from the book of Malachi show up only twice. Malachi is mentioned nowhere in the New Testament, and only once in the Old Testament (or twice, depending on how you count). We know absolutely nothing about him; the book that bears his name reveals no biographical details. As best as we can figure, he probably lived about 500 years before Jesus. His book is only 55 verses long, and it's the very last book in the Old Testament. Malachi is also the last in the traditional Jewish list of the 48 biblical prophets; there were no other prophets after him. If you're looking for a pretty obscure prophet, well, you've found one. So why is he important, and why is he worth remembering two and a half weeks before Christmas?

Well, for one thing, because his general message is still relevant, after all this time. He castigates priests who do not lead worship properly, who lack integrity and righteousness, and who offer shallow or misleading teachings. He reprimands people who are faithless to one another, who abandon their covenant with God, who abandon their spouses, who condone or commit evil, who cease giving God the tithes that God requires and offer cheap offerings instead. *All of that is still very relevant today.*

But there's also another reason, one that's particularly important in this Advent season, when we are preparing our hearts for the coming of our Savior. There's a very important *promise* in this book, a promise of a *messenger* whom God would send, later on, before the coming of the Lord: “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me.” Malachi may not be *mentioned* in the New Testament, but he is *quoted* in the New Testament. This line from Malachi is quoted three times, once each in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in all three cases, the *messenger* whom Malachi was speaking of is identified as John the Baptist. “This is the one,” says Jesus, “about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’” The implication is very clear: Malachi prophesied that John would come to “prepare the way” for the coming of Jesus. Malachi describes that coming like this: “the LORD whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple ... But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like washers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver ... Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD, as in the days of old and as in former years.” In other words: things are *pretty messed up* right now; there's a lot of faithlessness, infidelity, and corruption, but *take heart!* The *Lord* is coming. He will judge and cleanse the people. But before that happens, God will send a *messenger*, to prepare the way.

So that's why Malachi is important. Among other things, he pointed forwards – nearly *five hundred years!* – to the *messenger*, to the one who would *prepare the way* for Jesus: John the Baptist.

Most of the information we have about John's family and origins comes from the Gospel of Luke. There's a whole story about his father Zechariah, who was a priest in the temple in Jerusalem, and his mother Elizabeth, both of them "living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord," yet they were unable to have a child, until – in their old age – the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and declared to him that they would have a child who "will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God," who will "turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous," and who will "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." When the child – John – is born, Zechariah "was filled with the Holy Spirit" and uttered a prophecy, a song that we call "the Canticle of Zechariah." Some of it's about God; some of it's about Jesus; some of it's about John. About John, Zechariah says: "you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins." Do you hear the echo of Malachi's prophesy there? "I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me." The whole purpose of John's existence – the reason why God called him into being! – was to *prepare the way* for Jesus. Why was that necessary? Because *the people weren't ready for Jesus*. They needed someone who would speak to their hearts and point the way.

Which is exactly what John did. Shortly before Jesus began his ministry, John began his own; as Luke puts it, "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan [River], proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." And people flocked to him in droves. Mark says: "the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins." This was one powerful preacher! People were coming to him from far and wide. We only have snippets of what he said to people, but he left a lasting mark. Josephus, a Jewish historian who wrote towards the end of the first century, described John as "a good man" who "commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism." Josephus also mentions the "crowds" that came to hear John, "for they were very greatly moved by hearing his words," and that John had "great influence" over the people. Whatever exactly John was saying, he spoke with authority, with conviction, and with power. He was turning people's hearts back towards *God*.

Luke makes it clear that this happened at a very particular time: "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas." Tiberius was the second Roman Emperor, reigning from the year 14 to the year 37. Pontius Pilate was the fifth governor of the Roman province of Judea, a large region stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, including the cities of Jerusalem, Jericho, and Samaria, and the town of Bethlehem; he governed from 26 to 36. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, was the governor of the Roman provinces of Galilee and Perea, north and east of Judea, including the villages of Nazareth, Cana, and Capernaum; he governed from 4 BC to 39 AD. Herod's half-brother Philip was the governor of a region north and east of the Sea of Galilee, including the cities of Bethsaida and Caesarea Philippi; he governed from 4 BC to 34 AD. A less-well-known figure named Lysanias governed a small region called Abilene, further to the north; the exact dates of his reign are unknown, and it's not entirely clear why Luke felt it necessary to mention him – other than the fact that Luke wanted to be thorough! Additionally, Luke mentions two Jewish High Priests: Annas, who was High Priest from 6 to 15 AD, and who continued to hold a tremendous amount of religious and political influence for the rest of his life; and Caiaphas, who was High Priest from 18 to 36 AD. Put all

that together, and it becomes clear that John's ministry began in about the year 29 AD, probably about a year before Jesus began his own ministry. *Neither of those ministries happened in a vacuum.* There's a Roman Emperor, four Roman-appointed Governors, and two Jewish High Priests, who all held a *tremendous* amount of power, both individually and collectively. Yet somehow, in the midst of all that, one man, John, managed to carve out for himself a *significant* amount of influence over the common people. *He had things to say that the common people wanted and needed to hear.* Things about ... *God.*

It's remarkable to me just *how* many people John must have reached. It's not because of a lack of religious institutions and traditions. There was the temple in Jerusalem, to which Jews from all over the Roman Empire came for special ceremonies, including the three major annual pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles; there were synagogues in every town and village; there were rabbis everywhere; there were priests and scribes and teachers of the law ... there were *plenty* of opportunities to be religious. Just like there are an abundance of churches throughout our country, plus a huge variety of Christian retreats and pilgrimages and festivals every year. There was *plenty* of religion to go around. And yet ... and yet ... it's as if ... *something was missing.* The common people were *looking* for something, *needing* something, that the traditional religious institutions weren't offering. Something, shall we say, *spiritual.* Something that was *more* than institutions and traditions and rituals and buildings. Something more *relevant.* Something more *real.* These people needed words of *truth.* Words of *power.* Words of *grace.* Words of *love.* The utterly astonishing *love of almighty God,* something that was – and is – available to *everybody,* no matter *what* they've done, no matter *what* dark shadows they're keeping hidden, no matter *how* bad or “far gone” they think they are.

They came to hear a message. A message about *repentance.* A message about *turning their hearts and their lives around.* A message about *getting real* with God. A message about *getting back* to God. Not in some superficial way, not in the sense of just “going through the motions” and showing up in worship on the Sabbath day to say the prayers and hear the scriptures and sing the songs and sit through a sermon. No, this was deeper than that, *far* deeper than that. This was about *life.* The life they were living – and the life they *could* be living. The life that God *envisioned* for them. The life that, in their heart of hearts, they really *wanted* to be living, if they could only figure out how to get there.

Here we are, in the season of Advent. Christmas is just 17 days away. Most of us are busy getting our presents ready, our pantries stocked, our cards put in the mail, all so that we can be ready when the “big day” arrives. But here's what I want you to know: Christmas is about *more* than that. Christmas is about the coming of our *Lord.* Christmas is about the coming of the One who can *save* us from the life we are living, and invite us into the life that we *could* be living, the life that, in our heart of hearts, we really *want* to be living, if we can only figure out how to get there. The life that God *envisions* for us.

John was inviting people to *unburden* themselves of everything that was holding them back from living a real, honest, faithful, righteous life. To lay it all down, to give it all up, to set it all aside. Why? So that they would be ready and able to hear and receive the message that *Jesus* would bring.

What do *you* need to *unburden* yourself of, here, now, at *this* phase of your life? What's holding you back from the real, honest, faithful, righteous life that you really *want* to be living? What do you need to lay down, to give up, to set aside? What do you need to do to be ready for *Jesus* when he comes?

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