

Malachi 4:1-2a; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come.
Amen.

If I were to ask where in the Bible you find the book of Malachi, how many of you would know? It looks like we have a couple of brave people who know. It's in the Old Testament. As a matter of fact, not only is it in the Old Testament, but it is the very last book of the Old Testament. In the Hebrew scripture it closes the section called the Prophets. And it has the distinction of being the latest - or we could say, the newest - book that was written in the Old Testament, meaning that it was written about somewhere about 400 BC to 350 BC, maybe even as late as 300 BC. It was the last book written in Hebrew. Now we have a whole bunch of other books that some folks have in their Bibles. In our good Lutheran Bibles, we call those other books *The Apocrypha*. Those were books that were written from about 300 BC to the first century AD. But they were written in Greek, not Hebrew. The word the Apocrypha means "the hidden." In the protestant tradition we don't usually consider those books to be part of our canon of our scripture. They're good study books, good books to meditate on, Martin Luther said, but they're not part of our canon.

Malachi, our first lesson tonight, was written at a time when the people had returned to Israel from their exile. The temple had been rebuilt, but it was still a time of flux for them. They were under the foreign rule and the prophets were calling for a return to the Almighty. The prophets wanted them to clean up all of their mixed marriages and to follow once again and more strictly the laws of Moses. The people themselves were looking forward to a time when they could return to total self rule without the overseers of a foreign power. It didn't matter how benevolent that power might be. In their case, right at that point it was the Kingdom of Edom, otherwise what we would call Persia. A little while later it was the Greeks, starting under Alexander, and after the period of Greek rule then came the period of Roman rule. They wanted, and understandably so: to be independent; to have self-determination; and self rule. They also very strongly believed that the day was coming when YHWH, the Almighty, would return to bring them into that time of self rule. And when the "Day of the Lord," as they called it, when the Day of the Lord did come the enemies would be punished and God would welcome all those who were worshiping the Almighty, regardless of their nationality. They would be welcomed. In other words, this "Day of the Lord" was open to anyone who believed, regardless of Jew or otherwise; but those who continued to worship gods other than YHWH, they would be destroyed, they would be punished. That is the Day of the Lord.

Now we jump ahead a few hundred years. The Persians get overtaken by the Greeks who in turn implode upon themselves and the Romans come in.

Some kid is born in the back country of the Roman Empire to a young girl and her carpenter husband. This kid starts to grow up, he learns, he teaches, he gets a following. It turns out that this kid is The Savior. And the thing is, he ends up getting crucified, he dies, he is buried, and on the third he rises from the dead. He does a little bit more teaching and then ascends into heaven. There he waits for his return.

Awaiting Christ's return is EXACTLY what the early church was doing. They thought Christ's return was immanent, like maybe by this coming Tuesday. They believed that it was going to happen in their lifetime. And so there were some who thought, "Jesus is going to return. We don't need to do anything, this is going to happen and it is going to happen soon." There were folks who felt that way at the church in Thessalonica. Thessalonica is in modern day Greece over on the Aegean Sea side of things. It was a Roman seaport. It was also probably the favorite congregation of the Apostle Paul. He speaks highly and kindly of them. But as we heard in our section tonight, there are those in that congregation that they really didn't help out. Now whether they were just simply being lazy, or were actively anticipating the return of Christ, it's hard to know for sure. We do need to remember that in the early church, often times the congregation would literally support one another. If you had bills to pay, the congregation would pitch in. If you needed to bring your crops, in the congregation lent a hand. If you needed help running the store, the congregation picked up the slack. If someone was sick at home, they helped out. They ate meals together, they housed one another. They did what they could to live out the promises of their baptisms, to BE the body of Christ.

For Paul, it didn't matter that these folks who weren't helping out, it didn't matter to him if they were lazy or if they were awaiting Christ, from his point of view if you're not being productive for the body of Christ when you can be, they you're not living out your baptism. In our lesson tonight, Paul even went so far to say, "if you don't help out you don't eat." Now in their defense, if they **were** anticipating Christ return, and if Christ **is** going to return SOON, why **do** we need to bring in the crops, or tend the shoppers, or worry about nursing the sick? JESUS IS COMING! LET'S THROW A PARTY! I can understand that sentiment. The thing is though, Jesus hasn't come back yet. People have been proclaiming his return since about the time that he went up. And yet he said before he went, that "no one, not even I," Jesus said, "know when I WILL return."

Now maybe we can sit here today and shake our heads in amazement over those misguided Thessalonians. Unfortunately, that attitude wasn't restricted to Thessalonica nor was it confined to the first century. In the nineteenth century, there were a bunch of people called the Millerites (named after their leader, William Miller), who believed that Jesus was returning at a date in October in the 1840's. They sold all their possessions, gathered on a farm and waited. And waited. And waited. And that day came and they kept waiting until the sun

rose in the morning and they said "Oh, well we got the dates wrong." And so they figured it out again and they came up with a different date and that date came and they waited. And waited. And waited a little bit more. And then they had to get on with their lives.

Earlier in the twentieth century with the impending "War to End all Wars", Christ's imminent return was proclaimed over and over again, prompting thousands to stop work and just wait. But it is not just the stopping of work that is the attitude of those awaiting Christ's return. There are those who say "well, Christ is coming back, why do we need to take care of things, why do we need to be good stewards of the creation?" In the 1980's James Watt, secretary of the Interior, once said, "we can clear cut our national forests, because I believe Jesus is going to return soon."

Now I have to admit that I VERY strongly believe that we are, indeed, in the Final Days. However, I believe that the final days began when Jesus ascended into heaven and that to God, time is not important. Jesus might return tonight. Jesus might not return for a hundred thousand years. IT DOESN'T MATTER. We are called by the promises of our baptism, to live expecting him to return and yet preparing for tomorrow. We are called by the promises of our baptism, to prepare for Jesus' return and still take care of the body of Christ. We are called to look out for one another. To love, and care, and share with each other. For however long it takes. Martin Luther once said, "If I knew that Jesus was returning tomorrow, I would go out today and plant an apple seed." He was trying to impress upon his students the idea of *hope*. That we live in the hope of Christ and in the promise of Christ's return and yet still in this world. We know Jesus will return, he promised, and he always keeps his promises. Still, we live in this world. In a world that people get sick, in a world where we go to war, in a world where we are called to help each other. And while we hear those words of Paul ring in our ears, "If you don't work, you don't eat." We know too that we are called to care for each other. To do the best that we can to live out our baptism, to live out our calling, to live out our own witness of Christ in our lives, in whatever form that it takes. Some are more able-bodied than others, that is not what is important. What **is** important is, how faithful we remain to the call, how faithful we remain to the promises of our baptism. In that faith, with that call, let us go forth in all that we do as witnesses of Christ. AMEN.