

The Messengers of the Covenant

Malachi 3:1-7b

The Second Sunday in Advent, December 6, 2009

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. Jesus is the same today, yesterday and forever. But you, My people, do not complete what I say. Your fathers did not keep My statutes. Your fathers turned aside from them. You do not keep My statutes. You turn aside from them. You do not observe them. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. That means, among other things, that He knows that you have not kept His statutes. He knows that your fathers have not kept His statutes. He knows that you have turned aside from them. He knows that your fathers have turned aside from them.

He is coming as a witness against you. There are several ways to biblically think about the coming judgment. The most common one is that Jesus is the judge. Another one here in Malachi is that Jesus is the witness. He will bear witness against all sorcerers. He will bear witness against all sorcerers.

When the Harry Potter books came out there is a discussion amongst Christians as to whether or not such books were appropriate. Some Christians felt that they were harmless children's stories. They put them on the same level with *The Wizard of Oz*. Other Christians felt that such books were dangerous. They felt that the Harry Potter books would introduce their children to witchcraft, casting spells and other dangerous things. Like most people who stick their heads in the sand I ignored this question until my catechumens were talking about them. So I rented the first film. Frankly, people, when it comes to witchcraft we have more important things to worry about than Harry Potter. Harry Potter does not do sorcery even though the books say that he does. Harry Potter does not practice Wicca or witchcraft even though the books say that he does.

The reason that I know this is because I picked up a Book of Shadows once to read what was in there. It was a genuine Book of Shadows. This book was designed to teach you how to practice witchcraft. They had a chapter on prayer. The first thing they had you do was to find your prayer voice. You had to find the pitch of your voice that resonated with the universe. Once you found that voice, that was the one with which you were supposed to pray. Then they proceeded to teach the reader which of the gods you were to use when praying for particular things. There were gods and goddesses for all kinds of problems and you had to know which one to pray to in order to get what you wanted in regard to certain issues. This is sorcery. I did not read the sections on hexing others or casting spells, etc. That is sorcery. That is what Jesus opposes. Jesus opposes using anything supernatural for your troubles other than Him. He is the only supernatural person to whom you are supposed to appeal.

In fact one witch said that Harry Potter as an entre into Wicca would be similar to *Touched by an Angel* being an entre into Christianity.

Now while that makes it ok for Christians to read Harry Potter that does not mean that you go to the opposite extreme and throw caution to the wind. The Christians who are concerned about Harry Potter are not fanatical people, well, at least not all of them. They have a legitimate concern that Satan will use this to make real sorcery like the one in the Book of Shadows seem ok. Well, I'm just having my palm read. Well, I'm just reading my horoscope. Well, I'm just getting my fortune told. It is just for fun. It is just for fun and that's ok, but it is easy in such situations to put your faith in it. Once your faith is in it, Jesus is a witness against you.

I explain sorcery because I think it needs explanation. I do not think that these other things that Malachi lists as Jesus being against are all that difficult. Jesus is a witness against adulterers. I don't think that takes too much explaining.

Jesus is a witness against those who take advantage of their employees. They pay them less than they are worth. They do not pay them a living wage. They do not offer the benefits that their position deserves. Jesus is a witness against employers who promise a certain wage or benefit and do not make good on their promise. They say they will give health coverage, but don't. They say there will be a big bonus, but there isn't. Jesus will testify against such employers.

Jesus is a witness against people who take advantage of widows. Jesus is a witness against people who take advantage of orphans. Jesus is a witness against people who take advantage of transients. We talk a lot about transients taking advantage of us, and they do, but what about those of us who take advantage of transients.

Jesus is a witness against such people.

He will come suddenly to His temple. The temple of Jesus Christ is the Church. You are His temple. He dwells among you by His Spirit. Your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. You are the body of Christ. You are the place where God dwells. You are being built into a holy dwelling where God lives by His Spirit. When Jesus comes suddenly to His temple, He is coming suddenly to you. Jesus will come suddenly. He will come suddenly to judge. Or in Malachi's language, He will come suddenly to testify.

I remember a man who wanted to justify his divorce in front of God. In order to do this he went to his pastor for confidential pastoral care. He explained the affair he was having. He wanted to divorce his wife and marry the woman with whom he was committing adultery. He wanted his pastor to say that this was ok. The pastor simply sat there and listened. He did not say anything one way or the other. The man shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He was hoping the pastor would say, "It's ok." He was hoping that the pastor would quote some Scripture at him to tell him that it was ok. Well, there isn't any Scripture that says that this is ok. The man kind of got the idea that what he was doing was wrong. In order to make it ok, he told his pastor, "Well, at least when I go out with this woman, when we eat at the restaurant, we pray, 'Come, Lord, Jesus.'" Finally, the pastor spoke, "You better hope that Jesus does not answer that prayer."

The Lord Jesus whom you people are here seeking will suddenly come to His temple. He is a witness against sorcerers, adulterers, liars, those who take advantage of their employees, widows, orphans or transients.

Are you ready for when Jesus comes to His temple? Are you ready to offer Him pure sacrifices? You are all priests, after all. You are all priests. You are priests by virtue of your Baptism. You are priests who offer sacrifices. Your main sacrifices to God are your prayers and your praises.

Just as God was upset with the Levites at Malachi's time when they tried to offer lame or blind or blemished animal sacrifices, so Jesus will be a witness against us when our prayers and praises are blind to the needs of others. He will be a witness against us when our prayer and praises are used to conceal our sins. He will be a witness against us when our prayer and praises are used to oppress and use others, when our prayers and our praises are used to say, "Look how great we are," rather than to say, "Look how great our God is."

Our praise and prayers need purifying.

It would be really tempting as a Lutheran preacher to tell you simply that Jesus purifies your prayers and praises, by His sacrifice on the cross. And that would be true and is true. But it is not as simple as all of that. When Jesus purifies your prayers and praises, He does it as a refiner of silver and gold. He purifies us in the same way that soap purifies dirty laundry. There is a washing of us coming.

There is a purification of us coming. He will send His messenger of the covenant ahead of Himself. The messenger of the covenant will prepare the way before Jesus.

Oh, we know who that is pastor! That's John the Baptist. John, the Baptist, was the one who came to purify our hearts and refine our offering and to prepare the way of the Lord. Well, isn't that convenient for you and me to say that. John, the Baptist, is dead. Herod had him beheaded at the behest of a dancing girl. It sure is a safe answer to say that John, the Baptist, will prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus. John, the Baptist, is dead. He has no idea whether you have repented or not. Do you really believe that Jesus would limit Himself to only one messenger of the covenant? Do you really think that Jesus would have only one messenger to tell us, "Repent!" Do you really think that Jesus would limit Himself when it came to something so important as His return for judgment where He will be a witness against us?

There was a young man who had made the decision that he wanted to live with his girlfriend before they got married. He was going to have to move out of his house. She had an apartment. So it was easy for him to make this decision from a financial standpoint. He went to church most Sundays in spite of this decision. He didn't really see anything wrong with it. In spite of the fact that God says that there must not even be a hint of sexual immorality among you and this guy had more than hinting on his mind, he really didn't see anything wrong with what he was about to do. After all, he was going to marry her anyway. After all, he may as well see if this relationship was going to work out first before getting married.

Before he actually moved in with his girlfriend, he decided to stay a week with his parents. He had his things moved out of his old house that he had to leave. He stayed with his parents for a week. During that week neither his father nor his mother said anything to him about his planned living situation. But the young man could tell something was not right. His parents were not as chatty as they usually were. They were more quiet than usual. They were not rude to him. They were not mean to him. They were just quiet. Finally, after a few days of this, it finally got to him. He asked his mother what was wrong that she and Dad were acting so different. "You know what's wrong," his mother answered. "You want to live with this girl without being married and you know it is against the word of God." The messenger of the covenant had come to this young man. Only this messenger of the covenant was not John, the Baptist, shouting repent in the wilderness. John would be easy to ignore. This messenger of the covenant was his mother standing there in all of her incarnate reality loving her son and telling him the truth even when it hurt to say it. This particular young man altered his living arrangements so that he stayed in another place until they were married.

There was a devout Christian man who went to church most Sundays. One day he found out that another member of the congregation had lied about him. It was a pretty harsh lie. It made him sound cruel and he wasn't cruel. It made him look bad in the community. He was debating whether or not to say anything to her. Would it do any good? Isn't it also a viable Christian alternative to simply overlook the sin and let it go? The answer is yes, except that in this man's case the lie actually made him mad. It may be something that he could overlook, but in fact since he was angry it was obvious that he was not overlooking it.

Finally, he shared his problem with a friend of his. He suggested to his friend his plan not to say anything to the woman at all in spite of how she had hurt him with her lie. His friend said this, "Well, if you were the one who had lied wouldn't you want someone to correct you?" And again the messenger of the covenant had spoken. It was not John, the Baptist, crying out from the grave, "Repent." It was a friend telling him that the right thing to do is to talk to one who has offended you so that they are corrected and therefore ready to stand before Jesus when He comes. In this case the person doing the correcting also had to be corrected.

The reason that I give you these examples is so that you can understand that Jesus has called all kinds of people into your life in order to prepare His way to come to you. There are all kinds of people that He has called into your life to bear the message of repentance. My only exhortation to you this morning is to watch out for them. Watch for them. They are there. They are people who know what you are doing. They know that it is wrong. They love you. They have your confidence. And they have the confidence to say something to you about it. There are times when you will be the one who is called to be a messenger of the covenant to someone else. That is a subject for a different sermon. For today, all I want you to know is that when someone is asking you to repent of something on the basis of God's word, Jesus has sent that person to you and that precise time. I tell you this so that when it does happen, you understand precisely with whom you are dealing. This person, whoever they are does not speak on their own. They speak with the authority of the One who sent them. Jesus, the Lord, who will come suddenly to His temple as a witness against sinners.

His messengers of the covenant are here, precisely to refine you and to launder you, so that when Jesus does return your sacrifices of prayer and praise are offered in righteousness.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.