

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Malachi 3:1-4

^{3:1} See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight--indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² 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 fullers' soap; ³ 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, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Commentary

Malachi was active in Judah after the refugees returned from Babylon and after the temple was rebuilt (515 BC) but before the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah (445BC). He is interested in restoring pure worship at the Temple, castigating the priests for offering blemished animals for sacrifice, and rebuking the people for withholding the tithes needed for Temple upkeep and maintenance of the Levites. The prophet also seeks to strengthen the marital bonds between Judahites, issuing one of Scripture's strongest denunciations of divorce. His key theme is faithfulness to God's covenant and its precepts. Malachi challenges the people by turning their questions around from "Where is the God of justice in this world?" to "How shall we return?" To God and to the Torah to attempt not to find themselves on the wrong side of judgment.

Reflection

How do you sustain your faith in both God's goodness and power in the face of the cruel inequities of our time?

Luke 3:1-6

^{3:1} In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, 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, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Commentary

Early Christians interpreted John the Baptist's significance using Isaiah 40 and Malachi 4. They speak of God sending a prophet of repentance back to the people to prepare the way for God's visitation. Mark and Matthew only quote Isaiah 40:3. Luke's quotation continues through Isaiah 40:5 as an early announcement of a major theme of Luke-Acts—the universal scope of God's salvation. God's redemption will encompass not only the Jews but "all flesh," thus fulfilling the prophecies that the Gentile nations would come to worship one God.

Reflection

John called people to prepare for God's coming by repenting and turning from sin toward justice—making the crooked ways straight. Where are you seeing yourself being challenged to "turn" in your own life of faith?

Philippians 1:3-11

^{1:3} I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Commentary

Friends share all things, according to the popular ideals of Aristotle at the time, and Paul praises the Philippian Christians for having lived this ideal in their partnership with him. They have shared material resources throughout his ministry. They share his commitment to sharing the faith in their own steadfast witness to the gospel in the face of local opposition, which involves suffering for them even as it does for Paul (who is currently imprisoned). This brings us also to

an Advent focus. The increase of love and insight into how to love as God loves is the path to discernment as to how we might create a fruitful life together.

Reflection

How much do your church relationships reflect a vibrant, reciprocal partnership? How might you strengthen and deepen them?

A New Testament Psalm

Luke 1:68-79

1:68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
69 **He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,**
70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
71 that we would be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us.
72 **Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,**
73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us
74 **that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
75 in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.**

76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 **to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.**
78 By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
79 **to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."**

Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**