

+ Malachi 3:1-4 + Images of a Coming Savior: The Messenger of the Covenant +
+ 2nd Sunday in Advent + 9 December 2012 +

Have they shown up in your mailbox yet? In the last week, we received our first Christmas cards. Each Christmas card is special, not just because receiving actual letters and cards in the mail is becoming rarer every year, but because each card has a personal message of love and friendship often accompanied by a family letter or photograph. In some cases, that's the one time a year we actually hear from a particular loved one. What's even more special about each message, however, is that they often point us to the coming Savior and the joy, peace, and hope we have in his coming.

Now the Old Testament prophet Malachi has an Advent card for you and me today. However, the imagery on the card and the message on the inside are unlike anything you or I will receive in these weeks leading up to Christmas. The picture on the cover is another vivid image of the coming Savior, but the imagery on Malachi's Advent card is even more unique, because it's both terrifying and reassuring. We see before us **THE MESSENGER OF THE COVENANT**, who comes to judge and purify.

One of the neatest things about Christmas cards is seeing what kind of artwork is on each cover. It always amazes me each year how few Christmas cards we receive actually have the same imagery on the cover. I remember as a kid my mom hanging the cards with yarn around our doorways with each beautiful cover easily visible. I know of others who keep the covers for craft projects because of their beauty, especially in the way they depict what happened on or after the first Christmas.

The imagery on Malachi's Advent card is just as beautiful, if not even more, but it's very, very different than what you and I are used to seeing. There's a depth to the imagery not found anywhere else. As you look at the cover on the card, it's as if you're looking at two different scenes from two very different times, but both form a single, glorious image.

In the first scene, you see a strange-looking man, dressed in camel-hair clothing with a leather belt around his waist. He is standing near shallow water and proclaiming a message to a crowd of people. He is a prophet of the Lord and the people hang on his every word. In the landscape around him, you see mountains being leveled, valleys being filled, and roads being cleared of all obstacles. This is the one of whom the Lord said, **"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me."** This is John the Baptizer, the last of the Old Testament prophets, sent to prepare the way for the Lord through the hearts of the people. As you look closer at the scene, you notice that the prophet is pointing to another. His message is as simple as it is urgent. "Prepare! Look, the Messenger of the Covenant is coming to take away the sins of the world! Get ready!"

Your focus follows the prophet's pointing finger to the arrival of a greater Messenger. Suddenly, the Lord himself arrives on the scene. Unexpectedly he comes to a world unready for his arrival in lowliness, but yet he comes for a glorious purpose—to re-establish unity and reconciliation between sinful humanity and the holy God, to be the embodiment of God's love for every man, woman, and child ever conceived. He comes to fulfill all that the ancient prophets had foretold. He comes to be God's greatest messenger both in his teaching and by his perfect life and innocent sacrifice on a cross, for he comes to bear the full weight of your sins and mine on his shoulders. He comes to defeat the last enemy—Death.

This is the One of whom God said, **"Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come..."** This **"Messenger of the Covenant"** comes unexpectedly in lowliness to save, yet here is where the two scenes on the cover of the card form one image. The first scene depicted Christ's first coming. The second scene depicts his glorious return. You see, this same Lord will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Now that glorious return of **"the Messenger of the Covenant"** is a rather fearful sight. It's fearful for one reason—divine judgment is coming. **"But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?"** The answer is "None of us." Not a single one of us can stand on our own two feet before the coming judgment of the Lord. Not a one of us is 100% pure in God's sight, and for that reason, when the God of justice appears, not a single one of us will be found innocent.

The picture before us, however, isn't a divine Judge handing out judgments, but instead we see, **"...He will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap."** You look closer and see that the Lord Jesus is purifying the earth and purifying his people so they can stand in his holy presence. Like a refiner burning off the impurities of gold and silver, the holy **"Messenger of the Covenant"** purifies his sin-corrupted world with holy judgment. He removes all who reject him, all who think they can stand before him on their own merit, all who claim to follow him yet hold onto some favorite sin, all who give him mere lip service, but whose hearts are far from him. For them, eternal death in hell awaits.

You won't find that kind of picture on your typical Christmas card, but there's also a picture of reassurance there too. This same **"Messenger of the Covenant"** also purifies his people. With the almighty cleaning solution of his precious blood, Jesus cleanses all believers. He scrubs off the nasty, crusty guilt of your sins committed years ago and the new guilt from sins committed yesterday. With his forgiving blood, he rubs out the deep, persistent stains of the sins of weakness into which you keep falling. Then he repairs your brokenness and restores your sin-ruined soul. He wipes away the stains of your sorrow and your tears of grief, and cleanses your heart so you can stand in his presence on that Last Day. He cleanses you, but he also comes to refine your heart. **"He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver."**

The Levites served as the priests of God's people and served on behalf of the people. Since Jesus first came, the Lord has made each of us "royal priests", purified through his holy blood. Now he refines you and me, but how does he do that? In his gracious love, the Lord uses the trials and troubles you experience to refine your faith. Look back on your life and see how the Lord has done this! Look at the trials you face now and see how the Lord makes you realize how powerless you are on your own. Maybe the Lord has allowed you to have financial difficulties. Maybe the Lord has allowed health problems or disease to strike you or a loved one. Maybe the Lord has taken life as you knew it out of your control and allowed it to go in directions you never anticipated. Through these experiences, the Lord refines your faith like gold or silver. Like a refiner, he heats it up through fiery troubles, skims off your doubt or self-dependence and then hardens your faith stronger than ever. He continues refining your faith in this life until finally you come to your heavenly home at his side. That image of the **"Messenger of the Covenant"** on the cover of Malachi's Advent card is truly glorious!

When it comes to Christmas cards, you don't just look at the covers. You hurry to look inside to see who it's from and what message they've sent. The same is true for Malachi's Advent card. Now this card was 400 years old by the time of Christ, but the message inside rings just as true as it did when the prophet penned the words of our text 2,400 years ago. His message is a single question: "Are you ready?" Ready for what?

Are you ready for Christ's coming? Yes, the celebration of his first coming is only two weeks from tomorrow, but are you ready for his arrival or will you be caught off-guard like so many in Jesus' day? Will you be ready to receive him with joy and confidence when he comes to judge or will that Day be a day of sorrow because you didn't prepare? Now is the time to prepare for Christ's coming. Now is the time to turn from your sins and live. Now is the time for Christ to cleanse you through his Word and his Holy Supper.

Are you ready to stand in his presence? Life comes to an end as unexpectedly as the moment when Christ will return. Are you ready for that day when the Lord will bring your earthly life to an end or have you been putting it off figuring that you have time? Now is the time to prepare for the end of your time of grace. Now is the time for Christ to prepare you through time spent in his Word and time spent here at his Table.

Are you ready for the Lord's refining—the struggles, trials, and crosses he allows you to bear to remove your doubt and break down your self-dependence so he can strengthen your trust in him? Struggles and trials and crosses generally don't come with a big warning. They come unexpectedly, so are you ready or will the next struggle, the next trial, the next cross overwhelm you? Now is the time to prepare for the Lord's refining. Now is the time for Christ to strengthen you through his Word and with the forgiveness of his Holy Supper.

As you prepare for Christ's coming and refining of your faith, you discover that he strengthens your trust in his saving promises. In turn, that gives you reason to humbly serve the Lord with thanks. The Lord promises such a result through his prophet, **"Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years."**

In thankful love for Jesus, you can bring **"offerings in righteousness"** as you offer your time, your talents, and your treasures, every aspect of your life as offerings **"acceptable to the LORD..."** They are acceptable because the Lord in his mercy purifies even your sin-tainted gifts in this life. He prepares your heart as you grow in faith, and has eternal life waiting for you. Certainly **"the Messenger of the covenant"** deserves our thanks!

Yes, Malachi's Advent card is unlike any other card you'll receive this year or any other year, but the glorious image of **"the Messenger of the covenant"** motivates us to keep preparing for his coming on the Last Day. We look forward to that Day when we will stand in his presence purified by his blood, refined by the cross, and cleansed with his forgiving grace. To that coming Christ be glory and honor alone forever and ever. Amen!