

Sunday, December 9, 2018
“Announcing the King”

Malachi 3: 1-7b

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Comparison/Contrast Structure

Adapted from “The King is Coming”

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Ever get guests announced? If it's a good friend well, ok, that's cool, but what if someone special – your boss, the in-laws, the owner of your company, just showed up like the Publisher's Clearing House messenger?

Generally speaking Presidents, as well as ancient kings arrived “announced,” as opposed to a surprise. Our text today in Malachi starts, “Look, I'm about to send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me.” Messengers were an important part of the communication chain in the ancient world. Way before the internet or cable news, before telephone or telegraph or even the Pony Express it was the messenger who brought the news. Usually the news was good. If it was bad it wasn't worth reporting and the king didn't want you to know. Of course sometimes the news was what people didn't want to hear, hence “Don't kill the messenger...” It's not his fault he has bad news to share!

The messenger in our text came to prepare the way – in fact, Malachi means “my messenger.” The OT prophets used this image to prepare people for the coming not just of the king of their day like David or Hezekiah but especially the great, glorious once and for all king who hadn't yet come. Prophets were messengers of God who not only prepared the way but also communicated from the king to the kingdom of God. In a sense, Malachi is the announcer of the main announcer – the announcer for the one who will herald the coming king.

How do you prepare? Both Isaiah, which has a similar text to this and Malachi use language that describes clearing a road. Get rid of the obstacles. It reminds me all the road closures this summer when the President spoke at the Suncoast. Various routes between the airport and Suncoast were shut down for a couple of hours to make way, to provide smooth sailing – no traffic lights, construction or people in the way. But in Scripture, it's not Metro or the Secret Service preparing the way, it's God, working through these announcer servants.

That brings the next important understanding – what does it mean for the king to come? In the ancient world kings marched home to their capital city in a victory parade. Last week we

explored the close connection between a king and his city – today we think of the king himself coming home to his royal city. The grand processional included a lot of pomp and circumstance. He was to be recognized and honored for whatever victories and conquests and spoils of the nations that would come with him. It was all about the king and he did not come unannounced.

Which is what makes the word “suddenly” in our text so strange. The whole point of this passage is about the messenger to prepare the way and the people who were “seeking” their kingly lord. You’d think they’d be ready but when the lord comes, he comes suddenly.

So what are you expecting, now that the herald has announced the coming of the king? Victory? Triumph? The spoils of a conquering king shared with his people... or if not shared, then at least trickled down from rich to poor?

In Malachi’s day people were expecting God to come and fix the problems of their unjust world. They thought that the kingdom of God should be doing better than it was, having somewhat lost its way and its vigor in these waning centuries of the Old Testament, waiting for something greater to happen. They had witnessed a lack of good leadership even among God’s people. – kings came and went, and now the priests were losing their edge, taking any old sacrifice as long as it came with money to fund the temple or grease the palms of the priests. Many were just going through the motions – if the priests do the ritual we’ll be fine, no matter how we live our lives, our marriages, our families. God is big enough to include a wide variety of spiritual life and conduct, right?

But suddenly the whole scene shifts before our eyes in the text. The eager expectation of the coming king is met with the sudden question: “who can endure the day of His coming?” Something is very wrong here... the king is supposed to bring the wealth of the nations to his kingdom, right? The enemies were the ones who shouldn’t be able to endure this. But instead he is actually going to do something about the injustice, about good and evil, right there WITHIN his kingdom! And those who wanted justice – well, they’re gonna get it, just not in the way they’re asking for it. Those who thought God should reward their self-asserted goodness in a better way... well, they’ll figure out they’re not as good as they thought. Those who thought God should punish evil – well, they’re going to find out they are more evil than they ever knew.

“For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap. He will purify the sons of Levi, yes starting right with the corrupt priests and leaders and getting to the sacrifices and the offerings of all.”

And you see, this is really a good thing. It might not be what we expected or even wanted but it is what’s truly needed. “Create in me a clean heart, O Lord – purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean.” What’s worse than thinking we’re doing all the right things when we’re not? What’s worse than thinking we should be telling God how to be king when he’s king and we’re not? Do we want to be clean or just blessed by our own dirty standards? Do we want to see reality as it is or ask reality to bend itself to our misperceptions?

Yes the king is coming, the Lord who we’re seeking. He has a few surprises for us (and for all) when he comes. But he isn’t coming unannounced. John the Baptist made sure of that! This was God, working behind the prophet who was his messenger to prepare the way. John had some hard and harsh words to say, too as our Gospel next week will remind us.

And just behind John comes Jesus himself but he did not come as any other king. This is where the comparison ends. First, the message of both John and Jesus isn’t one of earthly conquest and victory – it’s a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. If there is justice, then it will come by God’s mercy and through his grace. Our sins will be paid for but not by you and me.

The Lord, who we’re seeking came to his people. They wanted justice and he gave them justice – he exposed their sin (our sin) and then he let justice be done and paid for our sins himself. The Lord who we’re seeking came to his temple. At one point he even appeared to be doing the historical kind of triumphal entry but this was a parody on the king’s parade. Jesus didn’t come to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for you. And then, but only then came the victory parade – not into the city but out of the tomb to those hiding in an upper room, scared of the world around them. To Galilee, back to Jerusalem and with a mission to announce His kingdom to the ends of the earth.

Then he left – but he’s returning. Will his coming be unannounced? God used Malachi, and then John as his messengers. God wants his coming to be announced. We know he is

coming, soon, even though that will be suddenly. But he announced it – and we can announce it, too.

Advent is a time of preparation for the coming that the King has announced. “Hark the herald angels “ will be singing in another great announcement when He comes. We’re waiting! We seek the Lord. Our hearts turn to the preparation at hand. Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand! In Jesus’ name, Amen.