

COMING CLEAN

Scriptures: Malachi 3:1-5; Mark 1:1-5

I once heard a story of two old baseball players named Harold and Burt who wondered if there would be baseball in heaven. They agreed that whoever died first would try to find out and tell the other. A few weeks later Burt died, and that night Burt appeared to Harold in a dream. “Is that you, Burt?” Harold asked.

“Yep, it’s me,” Burt said.

“What did you find out?” Harold asked. “Do they have baseball in heaven?”

“Well, I’ve got good news and bad news,” Burt said. “The good news is that there is baseball in heaven.”

“What’s the bad news?” Harold asked.

“You’re pitching on Friday.”

Both of our scripture readings this morning are a mixture of good news and bad news. Take our first scripture lesson: Malachi 3:1. God says,

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.

That sounds like good news, doesn’t it? For centuries the Jewish people had looked forward to God coming into their lives and bring peace and healing to their land. And Malachi tells them that God is coming, that God will bring to them a new covenant and a new life of well being and blessing. But this good news entails bad news. Listen to verses 2-3:

But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap; 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.

Before God comes into our lives we need a messenger to prepare the way. The fact is we are not ready for God to come into our lives. We are not ready for Christmas. We are not ready for the coming of God’s Son into the world, unless we are first prepared to make the changes in our lives that his coming will require.

Which brings me to our second scripture lesson. Notice how the gospel of Mark begins in verse 1: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus’ coming is good news. That is why we celebrate Christmas. But it requires preparation. Verses 4-5:

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

John the Baptist was the messenger that Malachi talked about. He was sent to prepare people for the coming of God's Messiah, and he did it by telling them, "You're pitching on Friday." Actually he did it by telling them that a day of reckoning was coming. Mark 1:7-8:

The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist was sent to prepare people for the coming of Jesus, and he did it by telling them they needed to repent and be baptized—they needed to clean up their act.

In our first scripture reading Malachi spells this out in more detail. Listen to Malachi 3:5. God says,

Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord.

What impresses me about this verse is the way it crosses the spectrum of modern American politics. There are political figures in this country that ardently defend marriage, that vociferously preach against any form of sexual immorality. They are quick to quote the first part of this verse against adulterers. But when it comes to the second part about oppressing hired workers in their wages or thrusting aside the alien, they tend to be much quieter. In fact they tend, more often than not, to oppose raising the minimum wage, and their preferred immigration policy is deportation. On the other hand, there are political figures in this country that trumpet the needs of workers and immigrants, that speak eloquently about helping the poor and defending the oppressed. But when it comes to marriage they tend to be quieter. They do not acknowledge that the breakdown of marriage is a huge contributor to poverty and that sexual morality is every bit as important to God and to human life as is economic justice.

This verse makes it clear that we all need to repent. We all see our country, our economy, and our families through the blinders of our own self-interest. We are all caught up in what we want, not what God wants. And until we somehow get outside of ourselves, until we are lifted up by the Holy Spirit to see our lives and world from God's point of view, we will not be ready for the kingdom Jesus came to bring.

Let me close with a story. This is from book three of *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, a book called *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. One of the characters in the story is a self-centered quarrelsome boy named Eustace Scrubb. Even his name fits this sermon: Scrubb. During one of his adventures in Narnia, Eustace comes upon a treasure hidden by a dragon. He

decides not to tell any of his friends about it so he can keep it all for himself. But while guarding the treasure, he falls asleep, and while he sleeps he has such greedy, selfish, dragon-like thoughts that he turns into a dragon.

At first he likes the idea of being a dragon. He is rich, he can fly, he can breathe fire and intimidate people, something he has never been able to do before. But he also discovers how lonely it is to be a dragon. No one wants anything to do with him. So he desperately tries to scrape off his dragon skin with his claws, but though he scrapes off layer after layer, there is always another layer of dragon skin underneath. And that is when he meets Aslan, C. S. Lewis' symbol for Jesus. Here is Eustace's description of what happens next:

The lion said—but I don't know if it spoke—You will have to let me undress you. I was afraid of its claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know—if you've ever picked the scab off a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh but it is such fun to see it coming away. ...

Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off—just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt—and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobby looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me—I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I had no skin on—and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again (pp. 90-91).

That is the kind of scrubbing Jesus intends to do on all of us, if we will let. It could be painful. Change is always painful, especially when it involves changing ourselves. But if we let Jesus do it, it could be the best preparation for Christmas we have ever made—the kind that makes us human again.

- Ken Onstot
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