

Malachi's Message

"I will send My messenger, who will prepare the way before Me," (Malachi 3:1). Before we ever meet John the Baptist crying in the wilderness, before we hear his sharp challenge calling us to repentance, we hear from another messenger – Malachi. Malachi, in Hebrew, means "My messenger." Malachi stands near the end of the Old Testament, announcing that God is about to come among His people again – but before God arrives, there has to be refinement, purification, and a transformation of hearts.

Malachi's prophecy is both hopeful and unsettling. It tells us that God will come swiftly – and when He comes, He will "testify against sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers, against those who oppress widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice," (verse 5). God will not overlook – nor will He long tolerate – injustice. God will not ignore lies. He will never be satisfied with worship that's all for show – all appearance – but no heart.

In other words, Malachi's message is not a peaceful one – but it's a message aimed at bringing true peace. Peace is never gained through oppression of people. Peace will never flourish where injustice abounds. Peace cannot grow where truth is ignored. Malachi wasn't trying to disturb the people just for the fun of it. He was calling them – and still calls us today – into a refining fire in which everything false and harmful is burned away so that what remains is good, pure, and aligned completely with the heart of God.

This is the peace God desires. Not quiet. Not order. He promises us His Shalom peace – the flourishing of humanity living in right relationship with Him and with each other. He gives us that, through the work Jesus did on the cross and in the empty tomb. So Malachi cries out, preparing God's people for a peace that requires change. And that same cry echoes across a few hundred years – until a new voice rises in the wilderness. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 3:1-12. **Read Matt. 3:1-12.**

The Irony of Peace Sunday

On the second Sunday of Advent, we're invited to reflect on peace. Yet today's Gospel lesson confronts us with one of the least peaceful figures in Scripture. John the Baptist appears in the wilderness shouting, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," (Matt. 3:2), and calling the religious leaders of the day (the Pharisees and Sadducees) a "brood of vipers," (verse 7). He warns them – and us – "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire," (verse 10).

This hardly sounds like peace. But perhaps prophetic peace always first sounds like disruption. The world into which John preached already believed it had peace. In the Roman Empire of Jesus' day, the word "peace" – "pax" in Latin – was a cornerstone

of imperial propaganda. They called it the *Pax Romana* – the Roman peace. Emperors like Augustus declared that Rome had finally ended centuries of war and unrest. They spoke of advancements, prosperity, and stability under Roman rule. For many people, the absence of war was enough to call it peace.

And in some ways, Rome did bring a kind of order. Roads were built. Hunger decreased in some regions. Piracy was curbed. But Rome's peace came at a tremendous price – crucifixions lining the roads, taxation that crushed the poor, military occupation, and the constant threat of violence for those who stepped out of line.

Rome's peace was comforting for some – but oppressive for most. It was peace maintained not through justice, but rather through domination and subjugation. That reality became unmistakably clear when Rome destroyed the Second Temple in 70AD. It was the heart of Jewish worship, identity, and community. Matthew's Gospel was written not long after that event. Its earliest readers were grieving, disoriented, and politically powerless. Their world had collapsed, and the so-called *Pax Romana* had revealed its true nature.

In that moment – when many were longing for deliverance, aching for security, hoping for a leader who would restore dignity and end suffering – the message of John the Baptist is both unsettling and necessary. He calls people not to cling to the status quo. He calls people not to take up swords to create a new oppressive order. Instead, he calls the people to repent. It may not sound peaceful – but this is what prophetic peace looks like.

Waiting for Peace – but Whose Peace?

Imagine those earliest hearers of Matthew's Gospel. They had lost the Temple. They were living under occupation. They were scraping together hope out of ashes. Surely they were waiting for peace – but they likely imagined peace as something imposed from above. A strong, Messianic leader who would overthrow Rome and restore their glory.

In other words, they were longing for peace through domination and subjugation – just with a different ruler in charge at the top. John's message disrupts that expectation. Jesus doesn't fit that mold. John calls everyone – including the pious, including religious authorities, even those who had grown comfortable with the existing system – to change their minds and change their hearts. This is the literal meaning of the Greek word *metanoia*, which gets translated as "repent" – to turn around, to reorient one's thinking, to see the world differently.

Repentance isn't a punishment. It's the first step toward peace. Because peace – real peace – requires truth. Peace requires fairness. It requires the courage to stand up for those who are hurt. Peace requires us to clear the way for justice, because we get ready for Jesus by preparing the road on which He will walk. We lay the palm branches of peace under His holy, nail-pierced feet.

A lot of people have the mindset that if there's no tension, there's peace. That's not accurate. The thing needed for peace to abound is justice. Dr. Martin Luther King,

Jr. said, “True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.”¹ This is precisely what both Malachi and John the Baptist proclaim.

Prophets are Truthful – Even When It Hurts

It is tempting to dismiss prophetic voices because they are uncomfortable, abrupt, or maybe a little too blunt and direct for our liking. Malachi’s words sting. John’s words cut. Many were tempted to ignore John because he was weird. Look at the description Matthew records, “John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey,” (verse 4). He doesn’t sound much like an impressive person, does he?

Yet Jesus Himself says of John, “Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist;” (Matt. 11:11a). We have to be careful not to dismiss a message simply because we dislike the messenger. Prophets tell the truth, not to intentionally cause pain, but because truth is the first step toward peace. Sometimes the message causes pain and discomfort, but it’s needed to bring healing. It’s like when we were kids learning to ride our bicycles. We would fall off and skin our knees up, and our parents would make us go in and wash our bloody knees with soapy wash rags. It stung, but they did it to bring healing – to prevent infection and problems down the road.

John the Baptist sees religious leaders coming to the riverbank. They appeared spiritual. They performed all the right rituals. They wore the correct clothes. But their hearts were not aligned with the heart of God – and John refuses to let them hide behind the appearance of religion.

He called out hypocrisy. He exposed injustice. You know, that’s ultimately what got him beheaded by Herod Antipas. He called out Herod for causing his brother’s divorce and then marrying his former sister-in-law. John the Baptist refused to let anyone pretend that peace could come without transformation.

This is what prophetic peace looks like. Honesty that shakes us awake so that we can be refined, purified, cleansed, redeemed. Prophetic peace says, “Real peace needs truth and fairness – not just quiet.” We saw that in the 1990’s with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. God wants to change our hearts. He wants real change, not just a pretend, Sunday morning show. Peace isn’t easy, but we can help make it real.

Refining, Not Destroying

Malachi uses the imagery of a refiner’s fire. That image can be frightening, but it’s not meant to be destructive. A refiner’s fire doesn’t destroy metal – it purifies it. It removes the impurities – what’s false in the metal – so that what’s true can shine.

Sometimes God’s refining work exposes things in us that we would rather keep hidden. Sometimes His refining work uncovers prejudices, biases, complacency, or fears we have ignored. I didn’t grow up in the United Methodist Church. I grew up in a

¹ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *When Peace Becomes Obnoxious*, sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, March 18, 1956.

different denomination of church, and it was in downtown Sidney, where the library parking lot is today. It had an average Sunday attendance of probably 200 people until I was around 13 years old or so. When Rev. Joe resigned, the local church began a “search and call” process to find a new pastor. We don’t do that in the United Methodist Church. Pastors serve at the pleasure of the Bishop. Anyhow, one of the candidates for the pastorate was a guy I knew from attending Camp Christian each summer named Joseph Hara.

Joseph Hara was Japanese, and had moved to the US in the 1960’s. This was 1989. I’ll never forget the conversation I overheard between Grandma Berryman and another lady from the church. Grandma said, “I don’t want a Jap pastor,” that’s what she called him, “I won’t listen to a Jap preach to me.” I was shocked. I told her, “Grandma, I know this man, he loves Jesus more than anything.” And she fired back, “Don’t you know what they did to us? They bombed Pearl Harbor.” Today is Pearl Harbor Day, in case anyone keeps track of that anymore. Grandma’s generation lived through, and served in World War II. Joseph Hara never got a call back to Sidney. Sometimes we don’t realize how hurtful our prejudices are towards others.

Sometimes God’s refining work shows us where we have grown too comfortable with the promises of the Empire. That Empire may be political, economic, cultural, or even religious. Purification is about becoming the people God created us to be. Friends, it’s not about shaming us into complacency – that’s what the Empire does.

Prophecy Always Faces Opposition

Both Malachi and John speak truth at great personal risk. They challenge corrupt systems, religious complacency, and comfortable indifference. And whenever truth is spoken, opposition follows. When we advocate for the poor. When we stand with the immigrant. When we protect the widow and orphan. When we speak up for the homeless, the mentally ill, the incarcerated, or the forgotten. When we insist that faith cannot be a mask for injustice.

People may question our motives. Our characters may be attacked. Our Christianity may be challenged – often by other Christians. Don’t be surprised, friends. The religious people questioned Jesus’ motives. He wasn’t surprised by it. The religious and political leaders also questioned John’s motives. He wasn’t surprised, either. Malachi wasn’t surprised by being challenged, either. Peace born of justice always – always – stirs resistance from people who want things to stay the way they are.

We see this in modern examples like South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, guided by Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. They led with restorative justice, insisting upon the painful work of telling the truth. They knew that genuine peace requires truth, accountability, and healing. Their hard work teaches us that what is lawful is not always what is moral – and that prophetic peace chooses morality over legalism.

John stands on the banks of the Jordan River and says something the world had waited thousands of years to hear – “The time has come!” All the prophecies. All the

waiting. All the longing. All the promises. “After me comes One who is more powerful than I,” (Matt. 3:11a).

John doesn't call attention to himself. He recognizes his role in God's story. He points people to Jesus – the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. In a world full of people making themselves the hero, John humbly says, “I'm not worthy to carry His sandals.” He knows who Jesus is. And John the Baptist knows who he is not! This, too, is part of prophetic peace – knowing your role, playing your part, and pointing others toward God's reign.

The Peace We Practice

Advent reminds us that peace is active preparation. It's hard work. It takes courage. It requires repentance. Malachi invites us to turn toward justice. John calls us today to change our hearts. Jesus comes to transform the world. So how can we prepare the way for Jesus today? First, we tell the truth, even when it costs us. Prophets speak the truth because truth sets people free. In Bible times, prophets spoke God's word to God's people. Simply put, they were God's messengers. Today all of us are called to speak God's word to the whole world.

We have to seek justice, not comfort. Silence and ignoring injustice may seem peaceful – may feel peaceful in the moment – but it's not the Shalom peace of God if injustice remains unchallenged. We must also practice repentance, regularly, and humbly. Repentance isn't a once-and-done sort of thing. It's a constant posture of us turning ourselves towards God's will. We also have to stand with the vulnerable. Throughout the Scriptures, God consistently identifies with the poor, the stranger, the oppressed, the marginalized. Any peace that ignores the least is not God's peace. We must never confuse order with peace. The absence of conflict is not the same as the presence of justice. And we have to let God refine us. We have to be willing to let Him purify our motives, cleanse our priorities, purge our prejudices and biases, and strengthen our courage.

The Shalom Peace God Offers

Many great mystery stories – like *Columbo*, *Perry Mason*, or *Murder, She Wrote* – tell you the answer right from the beginning. The mystery isn't “who,” but “how.” John the Baptist does the same. He tells us who Jesus is, before Jesus ever begins His ministry. “This is the One,” John says. This is the promised Messiah. This is the One Isaiah spoke about. This is the One who brings the true peace for which the world longs. The mystery is, “How will He accomplish it?”

And we, like the readers or viewers of a good detective story, follow Jesus' life in the Scripture knowing the end – justice, mercy, peace, and resurrection. There is peace in knowing that God has made a promise. There is peace in the waiting. There is peace in the prophetic call that wakes us up. There's peace in the refining fire. There's peace in Jesus, whose peace isn't domination and subjugation – it's deliverance and freedom!

The late theologian Howard Thurman once wrote:

The symbol of Christmas – what is it? It is the rainbow arched over the roof of the sky when the clouds are heavy with foreboding. It is the cry of life in the newborn babe when, forced from its mother’s nest, it claims its right to live. It is the brooding Presence of the Eternal Spirit making crooked paths straight, rough places smooth, tired hearts refreshed, dead hopes stir with newness of life. It is the promise of tomorrow at the close of every day, the movement of life in defiance of death, and the assurance that love is sturdier than hate, that right is more confident than wrong, that good is more permanent than evil.²

This Advent, God invites us into prophetic peace. Not the fragile peace of empires, but the courageous peace of truth and justice. Malachi cries out. John cries out. And through them, God cries out – “Prepare the way. Make the paths straight. Clear room for justice. Welcome the One who brings real peace!” As God’s people, may we have ears to hear, hearts to change, and courage to follow the Prince of Peace – not into a quiet life, but into a faithful one.

Prayer: Truth-telling God, help us to witness our world with Your loving perspective. When we would rather ignore the pain around us, give us the courage to pay attention. When we are only interested in our own stories and suffering, help us be curious about people who are far away or very different. When we feel annoyed or even angry about the behavior of others, give us the patience and grace to be good neighbors anyway. When the cries of the brokenhearted seem too overwhelming, help us dream of new ways to show support, new ways to love. Because You never turn away from us, fill us with determination to turn our faces towards our neighbors who need us. In the name of the One who knows our every need, we pray. Amen.