

December 6, 2015

Advent 2C

Malachi 3:1-7b

The King's Herald: Announcing the King

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Advent King. Amen.

Do you ever get guests who arrive unannounced? Generally, this is not a good thing! If it's a good friend, well, okay – come as you are and we'll take you as you are. Or what about your pastor showing up at your door? But what if someone rather special – you in-laws, the owner of a Fortune 500 company, the President of the United States, your boss – if you aren't your own—just showed up like you see in the Publisher Clearing House Commercials of the messenger showing up to tell someone that they have won a grand prize. Sometimes though it's a very good thing...just ask my wife. I once was the unannounced guest...I showed up the daycare she was working at at the end of her work day, with flowers and a ring.

Generally speaking, president, other dignitaries – and ancient kings – arrived quite “announced.” We know about announcers; they introduce the star of the show. Some of you might remember Ed McMahon saying... “Heeeeere’s Johnnie!” When I was a kid I was a Chicago Bulls fan and I can remember Ray Clay announcing... “And from North Carolina, a 6’6” guard, number 23...MICHAEL JORDAN!!!” I always thought my fantasy dream job would be a sports public address announcer. I could even announce...from Southern Mississippi at quarterback number 4, Brett Favre. When it comes to presidents, we know a bit about the preparations for any presidential appearance, and things weren't that much different in the ancient world. Two things are worth noting in relation to our text this morning. First, we highlight the important role of the messenger, the herald, who announced the coming of the king. And then we need to understand what it meant for the king himself to come.

Our text begins, “*Look, I am about to send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.*” Messengers were an important part of the communications technology of the ancient world. Long before the internet and social media, long before FoxNews, long before telephone and telegraph, long before the pony express, it was the feet of the messenger that brought the news. And the news was generally good. If it was bad, well, it wasn't worth reporting, and the king didn't want you to know. Of course, sometimes the news was not what people wanted to heard, hence the old adage: “don't kill the messenger.”

But the messenger, this one, came to “prepare the way.” The Old Testament prophets used this image to prepare the people for the coming – not just of the king of their day, like David or Hezekiah, some good and most bad, but especially for the great and glorious, “once and for all” king who was yet to come. We remember the great text of Isaiah 40...which we are meditating on, on Wednesdays, which is connected to our text today in the opening of the Gospel of Mark and to our Gospel in Luke 3. (Read the words from Luke 3). Today though we consider the words of Malachi, whose name

actually means, “my messenger.” For the prophets were also “messengers of God” who not only prepared the way but also communicated the message from the king of the kingdom of God.

So in a sense, Malachi is serving as a herald in announcing that another herald will announce the coming of the king.

So how does one prepare? Both Isaiah and Malachi use language that describes clearing the road: getting rid of obstacles. Isaiah actually talks about a highway, like a superhighway that meant smooth sailing; no traffic lights, no summer construction, nothing in the way. But it was God who actually did the preparation, through His servants. The people were to anticipate the coming king.

Which brings us to the second important understanding: what did it mean for the king to come? Again, the ancient world is in the background. Kings marched home to their capital city in a victory parade. Last week we considered the close relation between the king and city last Sunday. We also heard of King Jesus’ Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem...where they actually put things on the road...instead of clearing it.

Today, we think about the king himself coming home to his royal city. The grand processional included a good deal of pomp and circumstance. He was to be recognized and honored for whatever victories and conquest and spoils of the nations that would come with him. It was all about the king, and he did not come unannounced.

Most of the time when we think of processions with pomp and circumstance, we know they are announced ahead of time. We think of processions or parades for world championship teams, national championships or even state titles. For the Royals had 800,000 people at their parade. There was pomp and circumstance in the procession of two greats that came home to their royal city of Green Bay on Thanksgiving night. We think of graduation processions, wedding processions, and even the procession before the installation of a pastor. Some appear to be of much more grandeur...but they are all special in their own right. But here in our text...it’s all about the king...who’s coming and he is not coming unannounced...it is not a surprise visit.

But did you catch the subtle little word in our text, “suddenly.” The whole point of this passage is about the messenger to prepare the way, and about the people who were “seeking” their kingly lord. You would think they would be well prepared. Yet when “the lord” comes, he comes...**SUDDENLY.**

So dear friends in Christ, 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 the people were expecting God to come and finally fix the problems of an unjust world. They have lost that now – with the front page of the New York Daily News saying “God isn’t fixing this” after another mass shooting on American soil. 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 the people of God – the kings had come and gone, 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 conduct our lives, our marriages, and our families. God is certainly big enough to include a wide diversity of spiritual life and conduct. It looks like that today as well. Just going through motions and everything will be okay, no matter how we live our lives...no matter what we support that goes against God's Will and Word.

But "suddenly" the whole scene shifts here in our text. The eager expectation of the coming king is met by the sudden and striking question: "Who can endure the day of his coming?" Something seems terribly wrong here. The king was supposed to bring the wealth of the nations, whether gained justly or not, to his kingdom. The enemies were the ones who could not 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 are going to get it. And those who thought God should reward their self-asserted goodness in a better way, well, they are going to realize that they are not as good as they thought. And those who thought that God should punish evil, well, they are going to find out that they are more evil than they thought.

"For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap" (this was long before ivory was 99.44% pure and gentle.) And he will purify the sons of Levi, yes starting right with the corrupt priests and leaders, but getting to the sacrifices and 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 was truly needed. "Create in me a clean heart, O Lord – purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean," the psalmist writes in Psalm 51. What is worse than thinking we are doing all the right things, when we are not? What is worse than thinking we should be telling God how to be king, when he is king, and we are not? Do we want to clean or just "blessed" by our own dirty standards?

Yes, the King is coming, this Lord whom we are seeking. And he has a few surprises for us, and for all, when he comes. But he is not coming unannounced. John the Baptist made sure of that (actually it was God working behind the prophet, who was his messenger, remember, 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 came Jesus himself, but he did not come as any other king. He is where the comparison ends. First, the message of both John and Jesus is not 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 or me.

The Lord, whom we are seeking, came to his people. They wanted justice, and he gave them justice; he exposed their sin, yes, our sin, but then he let justice be done and paid for our sins himself.

The Lord, whom we are seeking, came to his temple. At one point he even approximated the king's triumphant entry, but it was a parody on the king's parade. For he came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom...FOR YOU!!!

And then, but only then, came the victory parade: not into the city on Palm Sunday...but out of the tomb! On Easter Sunday to those hiding in an upper room, scared of the world out there! To Galilee, back to Jerusalem, and with a mission to herald his kingdom to the end of the earth.

And then he left, but he will return...it's his promise. Will his coming be unannounced? God used Malachi, and then John, as his messengers, his heralds. God wants his coming to be announced. We know he is coming, soon, even though it will come "suddenly." But he has announced it. And we can announce it, too.

Advent is a time of preparation, for the coming of the king has been announced. "Hark, the herald angels!" we will be singing in another great announcement very soon. We are waiting for his arrival. It is the Lord that we are seeking. Our expectant hearts turn to the preparation at hand. Repent, for the kingdom of God is, indeed, at hand!

In Jesus Name. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior, our Advent King. Amen.