

WELCOME 4th August 2019 – 8 Pentecost '19 C

Malachi 3 & 4

Good morning! Welcome to worship today! Special welcome to our visitors/guests! It's our privilege & joy to serve you in worship.

It was a page-turner...a gripping read...The main characters seemed real enough to touch. There was vibrancy/colour/love/joy/life...& a villain who mucks up the beautiful & then lingers to sow seeds of mayhem & hurt. There's a promise of better & best still to come...You celebrated the victories & wept at the defeats. There are shifts & shocks & yes even lags...dull confusing bits in the plot line...

But then it ends...and nothing is resolved...nothing is settled...nothing seems finished. In fact the last word is "curse." Then silence...A script straight outta Hollywood? The next instalment in the Game of Thrones book series? A theatre production? No. No. And...No.

It's the Old Testament. As we come to the final scene & final word in the Old Testament, having progressed 2000 years between the promise to Abraham & the end of Malachi, navigated the plot twists, scene changes, varied characters geography politics & history...and all those "begats"...we are left with an unsolved problem, an unfulfilled promise & a major question:

'What hope do I have?' If that story somehow is my story...What hope do I have?

What hope does anyone have? We'll explore & experience that today...

Let's pray...

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Heavenly Father, there is no time like the present & we have no moment but this one. So open our hearts to you. Move in by your Spirit & grow the fruit of your Word in us. Capture each moment each thought & make it captive to Christ for whom we live & to whom you are conforming our lives...In His Name we pray...Amen!

8 PENTECOST '19 C – MAJOR QUESTIONS FROM THE MINOR PROPHETS: WHAT HOPE DO I HAVE?

FAITH CHAT: 1. Why might someone feel hopeless or hopeful? How about you?

2. How easy do you find it to give God the best or “first” of what you have (time, energy & money)? How do you decide?

Would you...call...yourself...a...person...of...great...patience? Are...you...good... at ...waiting? I'm not...& trying to be deliberately slow there for 2 sentences about pulled a muscle in my brain. Why did I do it that way? I have to remember, when I read the OT, we see enormously long time elements involved. We live in such an instantaneous culture...but you can't microwave the OT...God's work among humans isn't speed dating. When we read Malachi we have to remember we're catching the closing verses of a story that has stretched for more than 2000 years...Abe to Malachi is about 2000... Creation to Abe? I don't know...long time...let's leave it at that And when Malachi goes silent...400 years until the first sound of God's voice – the first notable stirring of the Spirit...in what we know as the NT...400 years...

We have no idea what that's like...Help me out here...3. Where do you find it hardest to wait? Why? What do you do in that circumstance...while you wait?

To reset the scene...Nth Kingdom of God's people had been obliterated by Assyria in about 722BC...never heard from again as a nation/people. Sth Kingdom was conquered over time by Babylon ^{b/t} 605/587BC...Then Persia conquered Babylon & sent the Jews home in stages starting about 530sBC. Over the next 125-150 years the Temple had been started...left to sit...restarted & finished...There was a period of intense devotion & faithfulness. Nehemiah came & led them to rebuild the wall around the city & begin to actually act like God's people again. But...the old bad habits re-emerged. Worship became rote/ritualized/routine. The people went through the motions % real heartfelt intensity...took God for granted & assumed it didn't matter & God didn't care either. Then God sent Malachi to speak His Word into that malaise/boredom/apathy & call God's people into deeper devotion genuine faith & persistent faithfulness...Then silence...for 400 years...silence...

What do you do when the promise is so long coming? How do you live when the end is just a vision? How do you persist when hope seems just a word?

Well...for the Jews, some retreated into the wilderness. They took their faith & a jug of water & hid out in the Judean hillsides. They retreated into a mystical spirituality. They looked at the world around them as if it was evil & the only hope for the promised Messiah the full restoration of God's kingdom & his people was for them to cleanse themselves of the world's evil & live in pure communities of faithful people.

Some took their devotion into the Temple & into synagogues & into their lives with great fervour. They clung to the Law & the prophets & they lived as if keeping it exactly could force God's hand – could instigate his coming again in power & glory. If they could just get it right this time then God would awaken his armies & drive out the Romans & grind their enemies into the dust & all nations would finally see the glory return to Jerusalem & to God's people. They cooperated with the current oppressors insofar as they allowed them to continue to live their faith within their communities. They prayed the right prayers, kept the right festivals & bowed to the occupying powers while they were watching & prayed for their demise in their hearts

Others believed it was up to them...the kingdom would only be restored & the Messiah brought forth from seizing the reins of power...God would bless the violent overthrow of their enemies if they could just raise enough support & enough soldiers to instigate a big enough revolt. Then when they had the levers of the state in their hands, Messiah would come. When they could capture the power of the gov't & when they could wield the sword like Joshua in days of old then God would act.

Still others simply went along with whatever made life easier...They accommodated to the culture around them & once in a while made an appearance at a religious gig. They were culturally faithful...barely. They flew under the radar & if pushed would claim a higher allegiance to the king than to God.

Has anything really changed? We see that same stuff...2000/some years later. We know there are those who claim the name of Jesus but fly under the radar; live culturally indistinguishable from those who claim no faith. Accommodate to their cultural surroundings; go along to get along...Certainly there are some who are convinced the church's role is to make the world behave better. It's our job they would say to act as the moral cop on the beat & point out where society has gone wrong...to elect more Christians to gov't office so that our version of Biblical morality or social engineering can be enacted...so that with our hands on the reins of power we can make things better....or at least make folks behave...

Others still have given up on the world as we know it & simply live apart from it. They cross the doctrinal 'Ts' & dot the denominational 'Is' in the confidence that they've got it right & the rest...well...

What do you do when the promise is so long coming? How do you live when the end is just a vision? How do you persist when hope seems just a word? When nothing is resolved...nothing is settled...nothing seems finished? One day follows the next...follows the next...& you see the "curse"...What hope...Malachi points the way...when he speaks God's Word...he gives us hope that is strong & lasting & sure. Let's walk through this together...

Chapter 3 vs 6...Malachi delivers this assurance: "I am the Lord, & I do not change." What does that mean? Well...first it means the declaration from chapter 1 vs 2 still holds: *"I have always loved you."* Struggling stumbling sometimes unfaithful sometimes downright hardhearted yet God has not changed his mind about his human creation especially those whom he has already drawn in as his own...I have always loved you & I'm not about to change my mind. I have always desired that your life would be lived in the fullness of relationship with me. I have always had only your best in my heart. I have always sought to bless you guide you encourage you comfort you protect you...and yes...*"The Lord disciplines those he loves, & he punishes each one he accepts as his child."* The Father's essence is love toward you inexhaustible unrelenting determined purposeful love. And I don't care who you are or what you do He is the Lord & he do not change. You can walk away, but that doesn't change Him

I said...inexhaustible unrelenting determined purposeful love...for what purpose? I pointed to this last week...but we need to keep hearing this...God intends those who live in his love will experience true freedom – genuine release from burdens & bondage – joy & life in its fullness & abundance. God says, I have always loved you so that in every part of your life you experience freedom, joy, abundance, comfort, peace, satisfaction, victory...Everything you touch turns to gold? No. Bulletproof? Certainly not...*"But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. You will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture. On the day I act, you will tread upon the wicked as if they were dust under your feet..."* – Mal 4:2-3

You were not born to live in bondage. You were not created to live in fear. You were not built to live in sadness...to dwell in hopelessness. You were not designed for despair. We were created for love & joy & the unsolved problem as Malachi's prophecy bleeds into a 400 year silence...is the human sin/rebellion against God that steals from us robs from us that joy...the human sin/human rebellion that turns us in upon ourselves separates us from the Father makes us competitors instead of brothers & sisters...the human sin/rebellion that leads us to crave the created things rather than the Creator of all things & in chasing those fleeting things we are then abandoned to our own worst...& it enslaves us & kills us.

So Malachi starts his final word with God's promise: *"Look! I am sending my messenger, & he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming,"* says the Lord of Heaven's Armies. *"But who will be able to endure it when he comes? Who will be able to stand & face him when he appears? For he will be like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes. He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross.* The promise endures that God alone will cleanse our hearts to make us again/anew in his image. God alone will send the refiner & purifier to make our lives reflective of his love & responsive to his word. These verses are picked up in the NT & seen to point 1st to John the Baptist, the "messenger," & then to Jesus, the "Lord" we long for who comes to claim & cleanse by his own life given for us. He is the one of whom John says, *"...the Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil."* – 1 Jn 3:8

Only when we hear that Son of God utter his last words: *"It is finished,"* is the work of sin/death/devil undone once & for all. The unsolved problem of the curse is solved in the death/resurrection of the Son who tramples our enemies under his feet & triumphs over all that would devour or destroy us & grants us freedom in his Name *But now you are free from the power of sin & have become slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness & result in eternal life.* – Rom 6:22 Now you are free. Now you can live that victory. Now you can live the promise that all burdens can be released & all chains broken. The unfulfilled promise is kept when Jesus stepped from the tomb & then sent Holy Spirit to live & move in us.

The end of the story is not tears & curses. Utter destruction & death. Silence & fear The end of the story is life in the presence of the Father forever. The end of the story is his image restored in us radiant in love & abounding in joy.

The silence is broken by the song of angels heralding "Good news of great joy for all people" The silence breaks when a teenaged fiancé is stopped in her tracks with the word that she will bear the Saviour...who brings forgiveness & restoration to the Father. The silence ends in salvation... *The light shines in the darkness, & the darkness can never extinguish it.*

Let's pray Psalm 62 together...

I wait quietly before God, for my victory comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress where I will never be shaken. Let all that I am wait quietly before God, for my hope is in him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress where I will not be shaken. My victory and honor come from God alone. He is my refuge, a rock where no enemy can reach me. O my people, trust in him at all times. Pour out your heart to him, for God is our refuge...Through Jesus Christ we pray...Amen.