

The Sun of Righteousness

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text for this Second to Last Sunday of the Church Year is from the prophet Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, the very last chapter. **For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.** Here ends our text.

My wife and I are currently living at the family homestead which my parents settled here in Darmstadt. One of the blessings that we enjoy is that 70 years ago my dad planted a lot of trees. Those trees have grown to provide shade for our house and patio and driveway. The beauty and color of those trees, especially now in the fall, is a joy to behold. But one of the curses that we endure is that 70 years ago my dad planted a lot of trees. Now those same trees are dying and dropping limbs everywhere. So, several times a year I collect all the dead branches and have a huge bonfire. The flames of the fire shoot 15 feet in the air, and I can feel the heat from 30 feet away. As the flames subside, I try to get close enough with a shovel to scoop some of the outer branches onto the pile, but the heat is so intense that I can only stand it for a few seconds before I have to back away. As some of our youth can attest, the coals are so hot that it's hard to get close enough to roast a marshmallow. Indeed, when I come inside and look in the mirror, my face is covered with ash and sunburned from the heat of that fire.

Now the sight of this bonfire and the intense heat it gives off is a regular reminder to me that I would never want to be cast into hell. The feeling of heat on my skin is bad enough, but to experience the burning of one of those dead branches would be an agony and shooting pain which couldn't be endured for a moment, let alone eternity. That big pile of limbs is reduced to nothing but ash, and the grass around it is charred stubble.

This is the same picture of hell that Malachi prophesies will happen on the Last Day when the Lord comes in judgment. **For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.** On the Last Day the Lord will come to raise all the dead. He will judge all the evildoers and cast them into hell. It will be like a burning oven which sets them ablaze. Their skin will peel and curl like bark off a branch in a fire until they are nothing but stubble. But this pain won't subside. Their flame will never be quenched nor allowed to smolder. Their agony will continue day after day, forever and ever, for all eternity. That's what will happen to all evildoers on Judgment Day.

Which begs the question, who are evildoers? Am I an evildoer? Earlier in his book, Malachi defines who an evildoer is? An evildoer was a **“man who does not love his wife but divorces her . . . and marries the daughter of a foreign god.”** The Lord was seeking godly offspring, but instead His people were faithless. They intermarried with nations who worshipped false gods and raised their children in idolatry. Malachi also warns, **“The Lord of hosts says, ‘I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me.’”**

Now you might say to yourself, “So far, so good for me. I haven't divorced my spouse to marry an unbeliever. I've brought my kids to church. I haven't bowed down to any idols. I'm not a sorcerer or an adulterer. I haven't lied in court. I haven't robbed anyone by withholding wages or oppressed widows and orphans. I've tried to be hospitable to new folks. Therefore, I wouldn't classify myself as an evildoer. My righteous life ought to spare me from hell.” We church people here today might look around at ourselves and think we're doing pretty good, at least better than those evildoers who aren't here today.

But the Lord also says that an evildoer was one who came to worship but who despised God's name by offering polluted sacrifices. **“When you offer blind animals in sacrifice or those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished.”** An evildoer was anyone who offered hypocritical worship to God. He offered to God, not his first fruits, but his last fruits – the leftovers that no one else wanted. In this way a person wasn't just robbing a worker, a widow, or an orphan, but worse yet, he was robbing God. The Lord says, **“Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house.”** If you're not tithing a tenth of what God has given you, then you're robbing God. Even the widow at the temple put in her two mites, all she had, and yet we grumble about a tenth. We also rob God when we come to worship but don't offer the Lord our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. We don't open our ears to hear the Word of God read and preached, and we don't open our mouths to confess our sins, confess the Creed, make our petitions, or sing the hymns. We offer polluted sacrifices and hypocritical worship. We don't fear God. We are all evildoers. Because of our evil works and faithless worship, we all deserve to be cast into that bonfire of hell, where the flames never cease, and the scalding pain never ends.

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But this is not God's desire for you or any person. God still loves us, evildoers that we are. God has provided a countermeasure to our dark and wicked ways. The Lord says through Malachi, **"But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings."** Our text says the sun – S U N – of righteousness shall rise. Now the star we call the sun is a burning fireball of hot plasma with flares 100,000 miles high and surface temperatures of 10,000 degrees. It makes my bonfire look like a match flame. But this S U N of righteousness does not rise to burn you but rises to heal you. This S U N of righteousness is also the S O N of righteousness. It's our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

How does Christ rise with healing in His wings? First, He suffers and dies. In His passion, Jesus endured all the punishment for our evil doing. There wasn't a nerve on his body that didn't feel the shooting pain from the rod, the whip, the thorns, and the nails. Jesus suffered excruciating agony on the cross. And then He experienced the worst part of hell of all. His Father forsook Him, and He was alone without God. That's what eternal death in hell is. It's more than the pain of the burning flames. It's despairing forever, away from the presence of a loving God. Jesus experienced that for you. Jesus suffered the punishment for the sins of the world in our place. Then the Son died. The sun set. But then, the Son rose. Just as certain as the sun rises in the east every day, so the Son of God rose from the dead with healing in His wings. Jesus rose into heaven where He sits at the right hand of God the Father and intercedes for you.

Second, how does Jesus rise with healing in His wings? The Lord says through Malachi, **"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel."** At Mt. Sinai, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, the Law of God, which shows us our unrighteousness. But on that same mountain, God gave Moses the instructions for faithful worship - the building of the Tabernacle, the altar, and the right sacrifices for atonement of sin. Those sacrifices pointed ahead to the sacrifice which Jesus made on the cross – the unpolluted, unblemished sacrifice of the Lamb of God. God gave us His best, His own Son, who in His resurrection is the first fruits of the dead. Today, God still gives us His Commandments that we are to follow to live a holy and righteous life. But when we sin, Jesus also gives us His instructions for faithful worship that takes away our sin. Like a cool washcloth wipes the dirt and ashes from your face, Jesus washes you clean in Holy Baptism. Like a spoonful of medicine cures your illness, the body and blood of our Lord heals your soul in Holy Communion. Through the Sacraments and faithful worship, the Sun of Righteousness gives you His righteousness and forgives your sin.

Third, how does Jesus rise with healing in His wings? The Lord says through Malachi, **"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers."** In the days of wicked King Ahab and Jezebel, the Lord sent the prophet Elijah as His messenger to bring the Israelites to repentance and turn their hearts back to Him through His Word. In the days after the Babylonian captivity, the Lord sent the prophet Malachi as His messenger to bring the returned exiles to repentance through His Word. Malachi's name actually means "My angel" or "My messenger." In the days before Jesus' ministry began, the Lord also sent the prophet John the Baptist as His messenger to bring the Jews to repentance through His Word. And in your day, the Lord sends pastors as His messengers to bring you to repentance through His Word. Your pastor preaches God's Law and hellfire to turn your heart away from evil doing. Then your pastor preaches God's Gospel of forgiveness, turns your heart to God, and absolves your sin. God sends you this pastor before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes, before Judgment Day, so that you might have time to repent and escape the fire of hell.

Finally, Jesus rises with healing in His wings on that Last Day. Just as certain as the sun rises, so the Son of God will come from the heavens on the Last Day with the glory of a thousand suns. Christ will raise all the dead. The unbelieving evildoers will rise in a condemned body which burns forever in hell. But Christ will raise you and all believers in Him in a glorified body which lives forever in heaven with Him. **"You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts."** On that day, we will leap like calves who are freed from their muddy stalls to enjoy the green pastures of paradise. We and all God's messengers will sing with the holy angels.

Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings
Risen with healing in His wings
Mild He lays His glory by
Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the new-born king"

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.