



FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, December 21, 2008

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Lection - Malachi 4:1-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v.1) See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. (v. 2) But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. (v. 3) 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. (v. 4) Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. (v. 5) Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. (v. 6) He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

As with each of the previous three Advent lectionary readings, the anticipation of the coming of the Lord is growing. Usually, this is felt most as the songs sacred in our sanctuaries and secular on our radios are increasingly those commemorating Christmas. In the next week, our number of services will likely increase as the requisite Christmas pageants and concerts fill our weekly calendars. Though the holiday is holy for us, our voice on this Sunday is competing with the larger and louder voices of the marketplace telling our congregants that they still have more shopping to do for Christmas Day is fast approaching. The secular world has done all that they can to make this holiday their own, offering competing protagonists (Santa, Rudolph), competing focal themes (gift giving, and gift getting), and competing excitement and enthusiasm. As we come to this, our final Sunday sermon wherein we can pose an alternative vision for this sacred holy season before Christmas arrives, we do so with a greater sense of the need to remind our people that “Jesus (really) is the reason for the season.”

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Malachi 4:1-6

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As a Christmas buff, I too note the war within myself come Christmas Season. It is easy for me to get lost in the holiday season and to lose sight of the main thing. Though I know that we commemorate the fact that God’s Son comes into the world at this moment, the food, fellowship, and festivities of the season all but overwhelm even the most faithful Christian. So, the Advent season is a wake-up call for me, reminding me that it was a poor carpenter from a town from which no good can come who came to us on this day. Amid the glitz and glamour, this is a sobering text that calls us to attend to the ancient expectations of the community that awaited Jesus’ arrival.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

This text begins with a warning: the “day is coming, burning like an oven.” Day of the Lord is a common prophetic symbol of the time of coming judgment on the wicked and a time of blessing for God’s faithful. Unlike some expectations of this day where it appears to be a day of utter violence and destruction (i.e. Amos 5:18-20; Is. 2:6-21; Ezek. 7:5-13; Zeph. 1; Joel 1:15-20), here it seems to retain a greater sense of balance and, therefore, it is to be longed for by the prophet’s audience. It is a dual day, a day filled with Deuteronomic blessings for the righteous and curses for the wicked. It speaks of the long-awaited moment when God’s long-withheld judgment will be manifest and the scales of justice will be balanced. No longer will the haughty, the elite, the “arrogant and all evildoers” live in luxury while the righteous suffer. God is coming to set the world in order; God is coming to make all things right!

The theme of this special day is repeated four times (vv.1, 2, 3, and 5) in this brief text indicating the significance of expectation. Note the building of anticipation with each new reference to this day. It is as though it will break through at any moment and long-awaited redemption will be here. This anticipatory expectation resonates with our collective sentiment at Advent, for the message that the Lord is near to coming resonates in our hearts and minds, as well. Understood in its original context, the Messianic expectation that filled the hearts and minds of oppressed Jews from the time of Malachi until the birth of Christ was the same sense of eager expectation that “soon and very soon” we weren’t going to see our King, but our King was coming to see us!

What a reminder this is for us that Christmas season, a religious holiday, marks an occasion that was originally not “just” religious. It marked a moment when the entire world politically, economically, socially, as well as religiously, was to change. It was a moment when all wrongs would finally be made right. As African Americans, our desire for such a day has been palpable whether it be during Juneteenth, or Watch Night, or any number of election days, we have longed for a day when the scales would be balanced and our oppression in all of its varying manifestations would at last be over. We have longed for a Day of the Lord when “Jesus will fix it.” Advent in African American congregations builds on that desire for a day, fulfilled in Jesus’ birth, but yet unfulfilled awaiting his “soon and very soon” second coming.

The promise of such a day coming is not without its own sense of retribution. Not only will God consume the wicked, a curse is implied as well. The day of the Lord would be incomplete without some kind of “payback.” There is a requisite, “This is for the hell you put us through,” inextricably attached to YHWH’s Day. This is cathartic, for what could be more comforting to the oppressed than to know that they will have a time of vindication? So, to hear that the wicked will be as “ashes under the soles of your feet” would be like us hearing that our oppressors will finally feel the pain of the abuse leveled against us for centuries, they will finally know the pain of living in “black” skin in a world that celebrates, honors, and respects white skin. The power of such happenings is less in the actualization of the victimization of others, but more so in the promise that “trouble don’t last always” and that “the world does turn.” We shall not be at the mercy of others always; we soon will have our day in the sun! Jesus said it another way when he exclaimed, “the meek shall inherit the earth!” Our ancestors in the Civil Rights Movement said it another way when they raised their voices in song and proclaimed, “We shall overcome!” Our celebration is not in relishing the misfortune of others. Instead, it is dependent on the fact that sufferers cannot be empowered until those forces responsible for their subjugation are finally overcome. It is then that “the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings” for those who love the Lord.

The promise of the Day of YHWH does not come without its requirements, however. The day of the Lord is a blessing for the righteous because they

“Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb...” As we wait for the Lord to make things right, we must remember that we are called to stricter obedience to God’s will. The obedience is herein described in terms of the Mosaic Law complete with its statutes and ordinances. Though we, as Christians, have a different relationship with Mosaic Law, we are not less obliged to “remember” that we have been called to a different set of values than those posed by our world. As Christians, we are called to live our lives by God’s system of rights and wrongs. Taking seriously personal morality and our commitment to justice, we are called to live out an example of God’s ways, rejecting the dangerous moral postures that hurt our brothers and sisters, and offering a new way of living out God’s forgiveness, truth, and light. We are called to express a new Law, the Law of Love that Jesus repeatedly commands of us as the testimony of our fellowship with him. As we await our coming Lord this Advent, our obedience to this Law should be evident in us as well.

The final verses in this text reflect again on the ministry of the awaited messenger, for YHWH says in v.5, “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah.” The return of the prophet Elijah is a poignant theme in Judeo-Christian thought. It is borne of the fact that Elijah never died, but was taken up into heaven before his servant Elisha’s eyes in a chariot of fire into the whirlwind. Fueled by Malachi 4, the prophecy of Elijah’s return continues to impact religious communities. Contemporary Jews still save a seat at their tables for feasts on Pesach and some even on Shabbat for Elijah to use when he returns. References to Elijah’s return occur in each of the four Gospels and are associated with John the Baptizer; in each of the Synoptics Elijah is a manifestation of this predecessor prophet. For example, Luke 1:17 combines aspects of Malachi 4:5 with Isaiah 40:3 in its foretelling of the ministry of John, noting that he will have “the spirit and power” of Elijah. In this regard, the work of John in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord evokes memories of this Scripture. He turns the hearts of the people to repentance as they come to him in the wilderness, and his ministry calls the people back to the Mosaic commandments that they had forsaken. As each of the Gospels note John’s role as the predecessor to Jesus’ arrival, they demonstrate his importance to the Advent story, for before the Lord’s coming is complete, this Elijah-type character must make his appearance.

As we await the Advent of our Lord, *we sit in the Elijah chair as well. We are called to prepare the way*, to call the world to repentance, and to usher in the Day of YHWH. As we share the message about Christ with corrupt politicians and uncaring persons who operate our criminal justice system, as we preach the Good News to our incarcerated brothers and sisters, as we call those who use or sell drugs to repentance and renewal, we are preparing the way of the Lord. During this moment, let us faithfully fulfill our roles as Elijahs in the midst of the world.

It is these words, coupled with the threat that YHWH might “put the land under a *herem*” or a “ban,” that the Hebrew Bible and the Protest Canon of the OT come

to a close; the latter canon sets up the great expectation of the moment of prophetic fulfillment seen in Matthew 1 with the birth of Jesus. These final words of promise literally find their fulfillment in the arrival of Jesus. As we come to this moment in Advent, we should emphasize the fact that these words of comfort for the afflicted, and affliction for the comfortable, are the last words before the Lord comes back again. And the Advent questions linger as we await the tender babe's arrival, and as we await the victorious King's return, "Have we been faithful to Him and will we be ready when He comes...?"

Celebration

We can rest assured that the "Day of YHWH" is coming. The day will be great for the righteous, so rejoice! If you're ready, rejoice. Our waiting is not in vain. Praise God who always delivers and to whom we give our highest praise, hallelujah. The Day of the Lord is coming!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: Ovens, smoke, burning stubble, roots and branches, wings, calves leaping from stalls, soles of feet, statutes and ordinances, the sun, Moses teaching the law, Elijah calling the people back to relationship with God;

Sounds: Evil burning, the wicked being trod down, the sound of the voices of Moses and Elijah; and

Colors: Grey smoke, black ash-like stubble, green roots and brown branches.

III. Other information for the Preaching Moment

Burning is a recurrent motif in this passage that cannot be ignored. The heat of the furnace, the smell of the smoke, the fear of the blazing consuming flames should reverberate in the retelling of this account. The sun warmly shining on the "righteous" with its divine embrace counters this feeling. The text ends reflecting on the scene at Horeb where Moses teaches the people the laws. A second instructor, Elijah, will call the people back to repentance and back to their familial covenantal relationship with their God.