

Sunday June 11, 2023

Lesson 2: Clearing the Way

Scripture: Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 7: 24-35

Context:

Today we continue our summer curriculum, “Inspired By God.” In this second lesson of our first unit, “The Rich Literature of the Bible,” we examine the various genres in the Bible and how the Old Testament connects to the New Testament. Thus, each lesson will contain a scripture passage from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Today we will consider how promises of future deliverance and visions of a lasting peace empower us through the struggles of life we face today.

The Old Testament passage comes from the book of Malachi. The book of Malachi is one of the latest of the prophetic books and is the last of the twelve Minor Prophets.¹ There is no record of a prophet named Malachi, yet can be translated to “My messenger” in Hebrew indicating the author was an unknown prophet whose name was given unto him by his writing.² The structure is a set of loosely connected divine accusations against the people in general and the priests in particular.³ The passage today focuses on a mysterious “messenger of the covenant,” with the later chapter of Malachi alluding to the potential messenger being Elijah or even the prophet himself.⁴ The chapter closes with a reference to the end-time, when the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked suffer a terrible punishment.⁵ There is then the promise of peace.

The New Testament passage comes from the gospel of Luke. The passage today focuses on the relationship between Jesus, John the Baptists, the crowds who followed them both, and their critics. In the passage before this one (verses 18-23), Jesus has a conversation with John’s disciples as John has been arrested and languishes in prison. The passage today responds to John’s question of Jesus and his identity as the Messiah as Jesus goes and does his ministry.

Jesus speaks to the crowd of John’s actions and mission. John was sent to be the messenger of the one whose greatness lies in this unique mission, to point to and prepare for the reign of God.⁶ Yet the audience is divided. While some believe Jesus, others do not. And Jesus has a word for them. These unhappy people are like children who stand at sufficient distance to both ministries to criticize and justify their refusal to participate by attacking the life-style of the

¹ Coogan, Michael D., ed., *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 436.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 436-438.

⁵ Ibid., 438.

⁶ Craddock, Fred B. “Luke.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 101.

too austere John and the too sociable Jesus.⁷ Jesus closes with a piece of wisdom literature of how the future will tell of how those who embraced John and Jesus will come to see their message clearly in their actions and their witness.⁸ Wisdom means not standing far away to critique and criticize. Instead, wisdom implies diving in and paying attention.

Application

When I first saw the Malachi passage, I immediately thought of the season of Advent. This passage is historically used in the season in conjunction with lighting the Candle of Peace (depending on which liturgy you use.) There is a tie between the messenger of the covenant, being purified, and receiving the peace of our Lord. It is a beautiful way to think of Jesus, the one who comes so there might be peace in our hearts and our lives.

Yet as we read these passages, we feel the tension present as we read of the contexts of the passages. The people in the time of Malachi are struggling with both corruption in the priests and the general angst surrounding the exile of Israel. Jesus must deal with an imprisoned cousin who has foretold his coming with people who seem eager to be discontent and scoff at anyone who does not have a message they want to hear. Peace seems like a lovely concept, yet something not present in such tension.

This is exactly the message needed though in those times as well as the world we live in today. The promise of peace is what God offers to us even as we choose other ways of living and being in this world. God wants to remind us both of how God's peace will prevail and how we too might learn of the gift of peace to receive into our own hearts and lives.

A few years ago, I read a book titled "The Anatomy of Peace," by the Arbing Institute. The main point of the book is how in conflicts we all contribute to problems by unwittingly perpetuating the very things we want to solve. Through several examples both on international and personal levels, the authors contend the blame and division we place on others reveal ways we have not heard or understood one another. The struggles we often face are because we do not want to have a heart of peace towards others, instead seeing people as enemies or nemesis to be destroyed.

The book stepped on my toes, and I would imagine steps on the toes of others. In life, we are often not content to seek peace or getting along with others. There is always an enemy to target, someone who is out to get us. We thrive on the chaos because we can either isolate individually or become tribal seeking allies to help us with whatever cause we have labored behind. Having a heart of peace towards people we do not like or agree is both labor intensive and often pushes us out of our comfort zones to be real with ourselves and what motivates us.

When I was in college, I once received a gift from a leader of a small group which has made a huge impression on my own journey with Jesus. The gift was a little decorated wooden block with Romans 12:18: "If it is possible as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone," with a little heart and cross beside it. The initial receiving of it convicted me of not forgiving someone who had wronged me, and it now sits in my office reminding me of how God's peace is a gift to us to help us bloom and grow as a disciple of Jesus.

Both passages today remind us the Prince of Peace has come and is coming. He cannot

⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁸ Ibid., 103.

always take down our enemies as we like or zap the people who probably could use a great shake. Yet he does promise us his peace and how he came to remind us of his kingdom rule. It flies in the face of the world and in the ways the world encourages us to divide and harbor anger, mistrust, hatred, and resentment towards others. He is the one who dwells in our hearts and reminds us there is a different way of being in this world and ultimately his peace will prevail.

How do you cultivate a heart of peace towards others? Why do you think God's promise of peace brings us comfort in anxious times? Who are people who radiate a heart of peace in their lives? When is a time you have experienced only the peace Jesus can give? What areas can you pray for God's peace in our world?

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