

6 December 2015  
Advent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Waiting for “Christmas” ”

Text: Malachi 3:1-7b; Luke 3:1-14; Philippians 1:2-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Just like us, the people in Malachi’s day were waiting for Christmas. Actually, long before that they were waiting for Christmas. David, Isaiah, Jeremiah - they were waiting too. In fact, even Adam and Eve were waiting for Christmas to come. The only difference is: we know when it’s going to come. December 25. The day the Church set aside in the 4th century to remember when God fulfilled His promise to send a Saviour. That may not be the exact, actual day, but neither does it matter. It’s the remembrance, the faith expressed, that is important.

So in Malachi’s day, they were waiting for Christmas - waiting in faith for the day the promise of a Saviour would be fulfilled. And it wasn’t easy, their waiting. Things hadn’t been going so well for Israel for a long time. Wars, invading foreign armies, and exile were their reality. But always God had sent prophets to them to speak His Word. To remind them, to call them to repentance, to encourage them, to strengthen them. And He did so until Malachi. But once Malachi passed from the scene, God fell silent. For some 400 years. No more prophets. No more speaking. Generation after generation, waiting, and hoping. For a Word from God. For a Saviour from God.

And then God spoke again. First, speaking quietly through the angel He sent to some women named Mary and Elizabeth to fulfill His promises and set them in motion, but then speaking like He did in the old days, publicly and loudly, through a prophet. To remind the people, to call them to repentance, to encourage them, to strengthen them . . . and finally, to announce to them that Christmas had come! And it happened *in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas*. At exactly that time in history, the word of God came to the final and greatest Old Testament prophet. For him to speak. *The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness*.

No wonder the people came out in droves to hear him! Even though his message was a hard one to hear, calling the people to repentance - and not just in word but in deed. To both confess their sins and to change their ways. Even though he called them *a brood of*

*vipers* - children of serpents, sinners descended from sinners. They went out in droves, because God was speaking again! *Finally*. After so many years of silence. And soon, very soon, they would hear from the mouth of God Himself. When Jesus, the Son of God in human flesh, would begin His work in word and deed.

That is an excitement I think most, or all, of us have lost. We who take having the Word of God - that we have in such abundance! - for granted.

We who have the Word of God right in our homes, but do not read it or hear it. Or we do, but it's in one ear and out the other, quickly forgotten. Or not lived because it's inconvenient. Or questioned because that's just not the way things are today.

We who hear the Word of God here, and hearing, "This is the Word of the Lord!" mumble back a less-than-enthusiastic, "Thanks be to God." A response sounding much like when you were little and opened a package on Christmas morning expecting some great toy, only to find a package of socks . . . and you mumble your obligatory and less-than-enthusiastic "thanks."

We who hear the Word of God say to us "I forgive you all your sins!" but hearing the announcer on TV say "touchdown" for our favorite team generates more response and excitement from us.

We who hear the Word of God come and tell us "This is My Body, This is My Blood," and yawn, thinking more about how quickly we can get downstairs for the *real* food and desserts.

What would John the Baptist say to us today? Well, he would warn us too, just as he warned the people then who took God for granted because they were physically descended from Abraham. Be careful, he said. ***Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.***

When that day is coming . . . that's the day we're still waiting for. That's the day we don't know when it's going to come. The day when days will end and Jesus comes again in glory. And like the people waiting in Malachi's day, things in our world aren't going so well. Each step forward in progress seems matched with two steps backward - in morality and godliness.

That's the day that's coming for us. But will it be for us a day of joy and excitement, like for the folks in John's day? Or a day of fear and dread? The day we are waiting for, or the day we wished would *never* come?

What will make the difference for us is what made the difference for the folks in John's day - **hearing once again the Word of the Lord**. For hearing the Word of God gave them thankfulness and hope, and so too for us.

And so hear. Hear again from the Word of God we heard today. Hear Malachi, speaking for the Lord: ***Return to me, and I will return to you***. That's not a command; *that's a promise*. That no matter what you've done, no matter how you've been, no matter when you return, He will be here for you. He will not turn His back on you. You don't have to earn your way back or prove yourself. He just wants you. All of you. Sinner you. And welcome you home in forgiveness and love, like the father of the prodigal son. And whatever is getting in your way of doing that - those things John talked about: ***mountains*** of pride or ***valleys*** of despair, the ***crooked*** paths of life you've walked, or the roads of your mind made ***rough*** by the so-called wisdom of this world - John and the Law have come to bulldoze them, to bulldoze you! And ***prepare the way of the Lord***. That when your flesh sees the salvation of God on that Last Day, when He comes again, it will be a day of excitement and joy for you. The day of your Saviour coming for you.

And then hear this from the apostle Paul: ***And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ***. That good work in you began the day the Lord baptized you and made you His own, His child. And ever since He has been working in you and for you, in ways you know and in ways you know not. Refining you like with a ***refiner's fire***, and cleansing you like with ***fuller's soap***, as Malachi again said. And while it's not always pleasant to be put through the fire and be scrubbed clean, your Lord will do nothing less for you. So that fiery trial your going through, the scrubbing, don't turn away from your Father, for He has not turned away from you. Turn to Him, repent, and trust that He is working all things - *even these things* - for your eternal good. That as St. Paul said, you ***be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God***.

It's not easy. In fact, sin and satan are going to make it as difficult as possible for you. But God is greater. As He said through Malachi: ***For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed***. Ever since that day when sin and death entered the world, our Lord has not let it win; our Lord has not let it consume His creation or His promises. Yes, it has wreaked havoc and devastation as we turn away from God and follow our own ill-conceived ways; but the Lord has remained faithful. Preserving, protecting, sustaining, until His *Spirit*-conceived Son came. And when He did, Jesus went through the fire of the cross for your purification, He shed His blood for your cleansing, and was Himself the tree that was chopped down in death, that we who are born a ***brood of vipers*** - children of serpents, sinners descended from sinners, born in sin and death - might live in Him, in His forgiveness and love. **That His forgiveness not be a place for our sinful nature to hide** - to get away with whatever it wants to do - **but for it to die. And that a past forgiven and a future secure enable us to live a joyful**

**present.** Not worrying about when that day of days will come, but knowing that when it does, whenever it does, it will be a Christmas Day for us, a coming of Jesus in the flesh for us, a day of joy and gladness.

Even as today is a Christmas Day of sorts for us, as our Lord is here for us in the flesh, speaking to us and giving us once again His Body and Blood to forgive our every sin and satisfy our every need. Christmas gifts, flesh-and-blood-Jesus gifts, for you. Until He comes again with one more gift: His glory, for you.

And so how appropriate that today is December 6th, the Church's day of commemoration for St. Nicholas. We remember him today and not on December 25th because that day was already taken for the bigger feast day of Jesus' birth, but also because the Church's martyrs are traditionally remembered on the day of their death - which the Church has always understood as the day of their birth into glory. The day when all God's promises were fulfilled for them.

That is the day we are waiting for, and like Nicholas, we know not when it will come, our birthday into glory. Will it be for us like Nicholas, the day when our physical bodies die and are laid to rest? Or will it be for us all on the same day, when Jesus returns in glory? We don't know. But this we do: God is faithful. And while *in many and various ways, God spoke to His people of old by the prophets, in these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son* (Hebrews 1:1-2). Spoken a word of forgiveness, a word of life, a word of hope, a word of promise. So hear that word, receive these gifts, and bear good fruit - all these, gifts of Christmas, for you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.