



Coming to Take Away Sins

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 126; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

"The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire... and he shall purify the sons of Levi... that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness." Malachi 3:1-3

Most of us recognise these words from our OT lesson because of Handel's magnificent oratoria, Messiah. We know almost nothing about Malachi. "Malachi", is simply the Hebrew word for "messenger". We don't know if it was his real name. Maybe the writer wanted to remain anonymous. Maybe he or she simply wanted to be known as the messenger of the Lord. The author lived in Jerusalem about 450 years before the birth of Jesus. ~~At that time the church had become decadent and its~~ ministers, the sons of Levi had become corrupt. They would keep the best sacrificial animals for themselves and offer to the Lord maimed and blemished animals. Malachi prophesied, however, that the Lord would one day come to the temple to refine and purify the ministers. He'd change their hearts so that they'd bring offerings in righteousness. Then they'd bring their very best to God in worship.

In this age, since the death of Christ, Christ has made all believers priests to God. God is here this morning to receive our very best. We're here to offer God offerings in righteousness.

Robert Webber, a professor at Wheaton College, my own *alma mater*, has written several books on worship. He points out that there's growing concern in the church about the tawdriness of our corporate worship services. Like the people of Malachi's day, Webber says, we're not offering our best to God in worship. So much of our worship, he says, is

human-centered rather than God-centered. So often we come to church in order to *get something* rather than to offer to the Lord our worship in response to his great gift to us in Jesus Christ.

So often the corporate worship of God is replaced with other things. Sometimes worship is replaced by *evangelistic services*. The focus of the service is on *non-Christians* and how to get them to accept Jesus as their Savior. Sometimes worship is replaced by *instruction*. The focus is on the preacher. People come to hear the preacher. Sometimes worship is replaced by *corporate psychological therapy*. The worship service becomes a kind of pep rally to psyche us up for the week ahead. Sometimes Christian *fellowship* becomes a substitute for the worship of God. People go to church to meet and talk with other people. Finally, churches sometimes substitute Christian *entertainment* for worship.

The focus is on the music which becomes a performance and the congregation becomes an audience.

Now evangelism and fellowship and instruction and music all have an important part to play in the life of a Christian community. But in Christian worship the focus is on the God whom we've come to know through Jesus Christ.

Worship isn't primarily for our benefit. That's so hard for us to grasp. It's so often hard for *me* to grasp. Worship isn't for our benefit. Worship is primarily for the benefit of God. It's a service the congregation performs for God. A newspaper reporter once attended a New England worship service in order to write an article on a famous preacher. In his article he said that the preacher prayed one of the finest prayers ever offered up to a Boston congregation. So often Christian worship is like that prayer. It's offered up, not to God, but to the congregation.

The angels sang on that first Christmas Eve, not to entertain shepherds, but to point them to Christ and to the glory of God. The shepherds came to that first Christmas service, not to get something, but to worship the Lord. The wise-men travelled far, not in order to get something, but in order to offer the Christ-child their valuable gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

We come to worship not in order to get anything, but in order to present ourselves a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God. You the congregation aren't the audience. God is the audience. God is present to receive your offerings of praise. Malachi speaks of the Lord as a refiner of silver. "The Lord whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple and he shall purify the sons of Levi." We believe that Jesus has come in fulfilment of that ancient prophecy. He came to purify us so that we might offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.

The refiner of silver, in ancient times, would sit and concentrate all his attention on the metal in the crucible in the fire. He'd look into that crucible and watch the silver until it glowed and melted in the heat. As the silver melted all the impurities would separate. The refiner would know that the process of purifying was complete, and the dross all burnt away, when he could see his image plainly reflected in the molten metal.

God sees you and me as precious gold and silver. We're valuable to God. *Yes, we all have a lot of impurities, a lot of dross but* God is making something beautiful of us. Christ has come to take away our dross and impurities. Christ has come to purify and refine us and take away our sins so that we might be pure and blameless when he comes again. *The church is going to offer their best to God in a few moments...* We come this morning to offer God our best.[^] *so that the glory of the Lord might shine on us.* And God is here to *to refine & refine & purify us -* watch us. He watches over us like a refiner this morning. Tomorrow morning he'll still be watching over you and throughout all the days of your *And we're going to present our offerings of money & of praise in hymns -*

when you go through fiery trials ---
life. In the crucible of all of our hurts and pain and afflictions God will be at work purifying us and burning off the dross, preparing us for the day of the Lord, so that when he appears he'll be able to see in us the image of Christ.

Let us pray: Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.