

## The Day Is Coming

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### Malachi 3:14 — 4:6

"You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.'"

Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name.

"They will be mine," says the Lord Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the Lord Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things," says the Lord Almighty.

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."



### Luke 21:5-21

Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down."



"Teacher," they asked, "when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?"

He replied: "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them. When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away."

Then he said to them: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven. But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute

you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and

friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life.

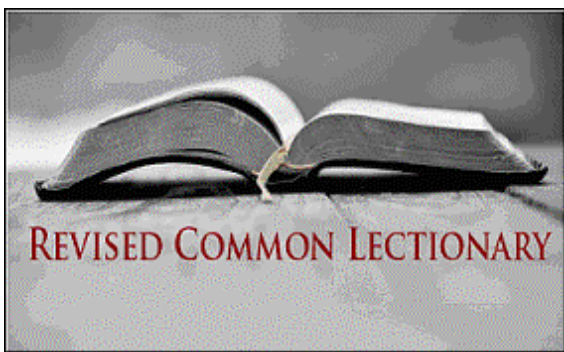
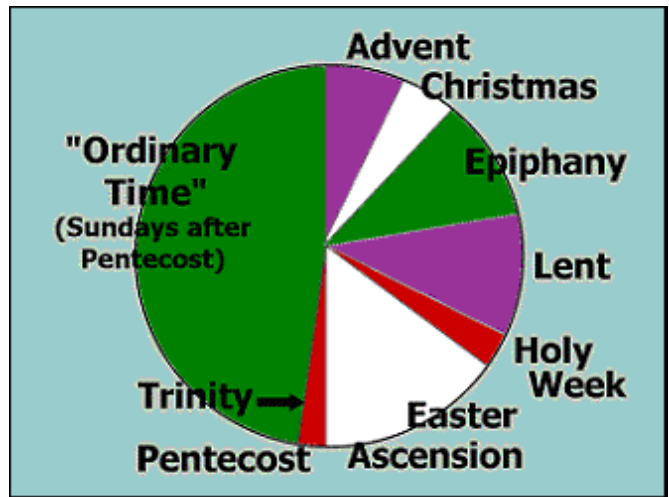
“When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written.”

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*Let the rivers clap their hands,  
Let the mountains sing together for joy;  
let them sing before the Lord,  
for he comes to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world in righteousness  
and the peoples with equity (Psalm 98:8-9).*

Sometimes it's easy to decide what to preach about. Special days occur, like Thanksgiving, Christmas, Epiphany, Palm Sunday, Easter, or Pentecost. It isn't hard to decide what's fitting to talk about at those times, and to select the Scriptures that are appropriate.

But then there are other days that are just plain Sunday. The seasons of the traditional Christian year begin with Advent, four Sundays before Christmas, and run through Pentecost, which is the fiftieth day after Easter, in May or June. But between Pentecost and Advent there's this long period, through the summer and fall, in which there aren't any of these special Christian celebrations. Yes, there are some national events like Independence Day or Labor Day, but those aren't part of the traditional church calendar, which is based on the life of Jesus, his resurrection, and the coming of his Holy Spirit. So for quite a while there aren't a whole lot of special things going on with the Christian calendar. In fact, worship scholars call this period "ordinary time," because it's — well, just *ordinary*.



So what do you preach about during *ordinary time*? One way to answer that question is to follow a lectionary, or a list of Scripture readings assigned for each Sunday. One such lectionary is Revised Common Lectionary, shared by several denominations. That lectionary always gives one or more lessons from the Old Testament, a Psalm, a reading from one of the Epistles, and a reading from the Gospels. The advantage of a lectionary is that it provides a good discipline for the preacher. By outlining a series of Bible readings throughout the year, it keeps the preacher from

talking about the same favorite topics over and over. Besides, a lectionary provides exposure to all parts of the Bible, including some parts we might otherwise ignore. So in my previous interim pastorate, in 2004-2005 in the Chicago suburbs, I followed the Revised Common Lectionary. That kept me from riding my favorite hobbyhorse every week, and so the congregation was more likely to be exposed to the whole counsel of God.

Another method for picking sermon topics is to select one book of the Bible and preach through that book, chapter by chapter. That works well for a shorter book, like the Letter of James. It would take a long time, though, to get through Isaiah or the Book of Acts. However, done the right way, that method has its merits.

As your interim pastor since the first of the year I haven't been following a lectionary or working through a particular biblical book. I've just been selecting Scripture passages and sermon topics from week to week based on what I felt led to present to you. Going forward, I might consider using a lectionary or following, say, one of the Gospels, to make sure there is more variety in these Sunday morning messages. But for now I'm just asking myself, "What are some themes in Scripture that we need to be considering, especially some themes we don't often talk about?"

You can go into many churches today and hear, basically, the same subjects preached over and over. For example, some preachers concentrate on a salvation message, emphasizing God's grace through the cross of Jesus. While that's a fundamental Christian message, chances are most *regular* worshipers have already heard it dozens of times, and have responded to it one way or another. So preaching that same message over and over amounts to what they call "preaching to the choir." My thought is this: there is a life in Christ "the other side of the cross," in the new creation brought into play by his resurrection from the dead, and for *most* regular worshipers the need is to get additional insight into what's involved in that new-creation life. This doesn't mean we neglect the preaching of the gospel of the cross; it just means we expand our presentations to cover "the whole counsel of God," exploring many facets of the Bible's witness to what the Creator is doing in and for his world.

So today I'm turning to a prominent biblical theme that perhaps we don't hear a lot about in many churches: the theme of *judgment*. To bring this out, I selected a responsive reading from Psalm 98, and also the lessons from Malachi 4, in the Old Testament, and Luke 21 in the New Testament. Now, it wasn't that I especially *wanted* to speak on judgment, because as you know I'm not a hellfire-and-brimstone sort of guy. But the Lord's judgment against unrighteousness and injustice *is* a prominent theme in the Scriptures, and if we ignore it we certainly aren't getting the whole counsel of God.

We live in a culture that shies away from the thought of judgment. The idea that God will judge and punish wickedness sounds — so *judgmental*. This is an age of relativism. Supposedly, one person's idea of right and wrong is as good as another's. In order to recognize wrongdoing, there has to be a standard of right and wrong. But as soon as you start talking about a standard, you get into the realm of *religion*. And that's a no-no, when it comes to anything having to do with public standards.

Not even the Ten Commandments, as basic and as solid as they are, can be recognized today in this nation as the basis for justice, because of their connection with *biblical* faith and history. Never mind that the Commandments are only the common-sense rules needed to govern any stable, thriving society. Because people associate them with Christianity, they now have to be removed from any public facility associated with government, whether local, state, or national. Nobody wants to be judged by a standard associated with Christian faith.

People are willing enough to judge others and declare them to be "mean-spirited" or "bigots" or whatever — as news reports associated with current events in our nation remind us — but only on the



basis of their own personal preferences. To claim that *God* makes judgments and executes them is to risk being called a dangerous religious fanatic. And there are some folks out there in the media today who are *frantic about the fanatics*, and doing their best to undermine any public awareness of the judgments of the Lord against sinful behavior. There are people out there who are determined never to be judged by anyone, and equally determined to *judge* anyone who disagrees with them.

What people think about it doesn't matter. What matters is what the Word of God says. There used to be a bumper sticker that read, "God says it, I believe it, that settles it." But that isn't right. It should have been, "God says it, that settles it, *whether I believe it or not.*" And God's Word says, "For he cometh to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples with his truth." So we have to talk about God's judgment, sooner or later.



Judgment was certainly a theme of Jesus' preaching. Who can forget, for example, the parable of the "wheat and tares," in which the weeds — the unrighteous — are gathered up first and burned, and then the wheat — the righteous — is gathered into the owner's barn? Who can forget the picture of the sheep and the goats, the sheep welcomed into the kingdom prepared for them but the goats sent off to eternal punishment?

And here, again, in today's passage from the Gospel of Luke, we meet this theme of judgment. Jesus is warning his disciples about fearful things to come — war, famine, pestilence, betrayal, persecution, — followed by the desolation of Jerusalem. "For this," Jesus tells them, "is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written." Other translations call these days the "days of vengeance," when the Lord will judge the enemies of his truth.

The Lord's judgments aren't always cosmic. Sometimes they can be pretty local. Put yourself in the disciples' shoes — or sandals — for a moment. What were they facing? Their Master has been proclaiming the kingdom of God to their people, calling them back to the mission the Lord gave to their forefather Abraham — to be "a light to the nations," to renew their commitment to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind and strength — but the religious leaders of the community have turned a deaf ear. Now Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem, headquarters of the self-satisfied who are fiercely opposed to his message. Barring the Father's miraculous intervention, only a cross can lie ahead for their Lord, and persecution for them. And Jesus doesn't shy away from the danger they all face. He tells them that by standing firm, they will get through it. It won't be easy; it will take a lot of courage and faith to go through those days. But *the end will come* — the end of their persecutors' power and domination.

"When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies," says Jesus, "you will know that its desolation is near." A very *local* judgment is coming — a judgment localized in Jerusalem, the city that should have responded to the King's invitation into the kingdom, but instead rejected him and refused to



acknowledge him as Messiah. And what Jesus predicted took place when, in the year 70, the Roman armies burned and destroyed a rebellious Jerusalem and its beautiful, almost-new Temple.

Well, that's a kind of history lesson, but so what? It happened 1900 years ago. I think what we have to glean from this passage in Luke is that judgment will eventually fall upon any nation, any community or any culture that opposes the move of God. It may be tough for believers for a while, but in the end God's faithful will prevail and their enemies will be exposed and brought to judgment. We don't like to think in this polarizing kind of way, but the Bible never shies away from it. The day is coming when evil won't be glossed over and called good. As the Lord told Malachi, "You will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not" (Malachi 3:18).

As Christians, we all love our country but we're not happy about some of the practices that are allowed by our courts, encouraged by our educational system, or celebrated in our media. When a baby can be murdered in the womb in the name of a so-called "right to privacy" — whose privacy, I ask you? — or when a man thinks he can marry another man and the courts say he has a constitutional right to it — even though the human body was rather obviously designed for another sort of activity — then we wonder about the judgments of God. Yet in our own time we've seen the judgments against the Third Reich, which gassed millions of innocent Jews and others, and the "evil empire" of Soviet communism which enslaved and liquidated even more. There will be a similar judgment against our own nation unless we turn back to the standards God has laid down in his Word.

Will Islamic terrorists —the likes of ISIS and al-Qaeda — be the instruments of God's judgment, as the Assyrians and Babylonians were for wayward Israel, and the Romans for an unfaithful Jerusalem? We can all work toward a revival of the Christian witness in our land. We can pray that a return to biblical values will expand into a culture-transforming influence in our country, and spare us the "days of vengeance." But, as someone has said, if God doesn't judge America he'll have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord's warning to Malachi rings in our ears: Get your act together, or "I will come and strike the land with a curse."

Judgment doesn't always fall in sudden and dramatic ways. God's judgments can take effect almost imperceptibly, over a period of time. We see the results of his judgment against sin in the cumulative effect of millions of lives being lived in ignorance of his ways — in the decrease in the general quality of life as our culture sinks into crudity, violence and self-centeredness. We see the results of God's judgment

in the individual lives of people we know who've chosen to live without the light of Christ; some of these people might be our own friends or family members. Shirley Anne and I pray regularly for several of our family members, because their lives are affected by their reluctance to embrace the way of Jesus.

There's an interesting biblical definition of judgment, in John 3:19: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." God doesn't have to send a bolt of lightning, or even allow some

human instrument to exercise his judgment. The punishment for turning out the lights is *to walk in darkness*. The Bible talks about the wrath of God; as Paul says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (Romans 1:18). When you suppress the truth, God doesn't have to zap you with some extra punishment.

*"This is the judgment, that*  
**LIGHT**  
*has come into the world,  
and men loved darkness  
rather than light . . ."*  
-- John 3:19

When you deny the truth, your punishment is *the lie that you live*. We experience God's judgment in the kind of life we have when we cut him out of the picture. That's God's wrath.

"For he cometh to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples with his truth." I've suggested there's a clear divide in Scripture between the righteous and the wicked, and the wicked fall under the judgments of God. As the first Psalm says, "the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (Psalm 1:6). The biblical authors always know which side of the line they're standing on; if you read the Psalms, for example, the enemies of the speaker are always God's enemies too, and the speaker has no doubt that he's on the Lord's side. That's just what it means to be in covenant with the Lord.

But there's a caution here. The closer we are to the Lord, *the more he expects of us*, for we are those who ought to know best how to honor his Word and escape his judgments — as he promises we will, if we're faithful. But it's easy to let down our guard, just as Israel did. The prophet Amos understood the responsibility God's people have to live lives that give the Lord no cause for grief and no occasion for judgment. Sadly, Amos found that his community was wanting in that regard, and in the Lord's name he declared, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). The apostle Peter saw this, too, when he said, "For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17).

Paul reminds us that, as members of the body of Christ, each of us is "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19). As such, we too are under judgment. As Malachi warns, "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" (Malachi 3:1-2). When God executes his judgments, they fall first upon his own people who fail to live up to their calling.

"Surely the day is coming," declares Malachi. "It will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the Lord Almighty." (Malachi 4:1). That's pretty serious stuff, and we see it happening all about us in the troubled and pointless and shallow lives of many who arrogantly refuse to take God into account. We have to guard ourselves, lest we fall prey to a like arrogance, forget the Lord, and become liable to the same judgment.

But Jesus gave us a way out, a way to "flee from the wrath to come." "Don't be frightened," he told us. "By standing firm you will gain life." Flee to Jesus, and take refuge in him, and hold to the promise of the Lord: "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings" (Malachi 4:2).



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