

## With Healing in its Wings

23<sup>rd</sup> Pentecost C, 11/13/22

The lectionary in November does strange things. Once it's had us remember the saints we've lost in the year that is past, and the years before that, which we did on All Saints' Sunday, it finds itself in parts of the Bible that one would not, say, read to people struggling with depression or anxiety, or who find the shortened days and lengthening shadows hard to bear. But that is our road, and we take it in the hopes that the Lord would find words to speak to us on it that comfort, guide, and soothe, even if the stones are sharp, and the shadows long.

So, with great hope that we turn first to...Malachi? So it would seem, given the title of the sermon, "With Healing in its Wings." That is the way he describes how the Sun of Righteousness shall arise for all who revere the name of the Lord, blessed be they (we?). That is good news; healing always is. But it raises a question: healing from what? Well, from whatever happened in the verse before, whatever the arrogant and evildoers have done to get themselves reduced to stubble on a parched earth on a day that will burn them up, being as hot as an oven – as if that could happen, except it already has and will, at least the oven part. The powers that be in the world-as-it-is appear unlikely, I am sad to say, to be willing to do all that's needed to stop the earth from warming to the point in which large portions of it become uninhabitable, and much of the rest of it far less pleasant and cool and green as would be best for us. Entire political and even religious movements abide among us dedicated to ensuring that we do not, as 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians warned us last week, led by some of the worst human beings who have ever lived or been imagined. But on them and on us the Sun that is Righteous still will rise, with healing going before it as the very horns of the morning, shining way up in the sky before the sunrise, when the world is bathed in the gentle light that is coming, that it needs, and that none can arrest or deny.

There may be at the end of things a Day of Doom when they who have it coming get it coming and going. After it, thanks be to the Lord above, comes an Eternity of Peace. Amen.

So much for two powerful verses from Malachi. I should add, by way of closing, that when the sunniest of a Sunday's lessons given to us comes from the Hebrew prophets, get ready for some serious New Testament gloom. 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians does not disappoint, again, calling out some lazy, if saved, parasites living among them and choosing to do nothing, in the name of Christ, since the end is no doubt coming soon. Get back to work, Paul *et al.* tells them – and you there who are already getting on with it, don't rest until you see the sweat pour from these lazy bones' faces or made hunger itself become the goad. “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat,” he adds, sloth being one of the seven deadly sins<sup>1</sup>. None, he says, should become a burden to their neighbors, but in the name of Christ “do their work quietly and earn their own living.”

That sounds perfectly respectable; is it not written somewhere that ‘work will set you free?’ So long, that is, that good work exists that is fit for decent people to do, and those who labor get paid a fair wage and treated with dignity. However, one cannot ‘get on with it’ if there is no ‘it’ with which to get on. I lost count this week of how many times this verse has been used as a weapon against working people, though not quite so much against the idle rich. It has been shouted from pulpit to lectern to altar to deny striking workers, the unemployed, the sick, the poor, and even the young and old the support of the church and the state, or to shame those who can no longer bear the burden of hard labor, or the injustices inflicted upon them as they try to. It is often used to support a position we hear in the voice of the pietistic Ebenezer

---

<sup>1</sup> Technically, the sin usually given as “sloth” is known as “acedie,” or *acedia*, which means indifference, indolence, not really trying anymore, or caring about things. Wallowing in self-pity is a key form of it, as is what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*, resentment, blaming others for all one's problems and doing nothing about them oneself or even trying to make things better.

Scrooge in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, to the effect that it were better for the poor, unemployed, and unemployable to quietly shuffle off and die and thereby reduce the surplus population. It is morally wrong, the old sinner believed, to help those in need – at least, until he understood what happened when you didn't.

To take another example: many a 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher railed in England *against* sending relief to those starving in Ireland. They were starving because the English took as their due in rents as much of the food that grew on that island as they could, leaving behind only grass, trees, and blighted potatoes. But that mattered not to these upright, moral men of the cloth and gown. They claimed, they insisted that the Irish had no food, and should have no food, because they were lazy, and that feeding the poor only made them dependent and taught them bad manners and morals. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child', they said. Let them starve in the name of Christ. Did he not say that 'the poor you shall always have with you', and therefore to focus instead on him?

When pietists or other moral, upright people who should know better speak this way, as they often do, one cannot but recall what the prophet Malachi said about the arrogant and evildoers becoming stubble on dry, broken ground.

What Paul meant, and what Jesus certainly would've told him he should mean, with this quip about 'who shall not work, shall not eat', is more along the lines of "From each according to their ability; to each according to their need." I forget who said that, but it strikes me as a far better reading of the 2<sup>nd</sup> great commandment than whatever the Scrooges of this world make of it.

Which brings us to the gospel. Oh, dear. Not one stone shall be left upon another. All this beauty shall be as naught – and then it'll be like Stalin's Russia or Hitler's Reich up in here, with parents turning their children into the KGB or the Gestapo, and even siblings and friends – and after that, it gets even better! Wars and rumors of

wars, earthquakes, fires, floods, plagues, the whole apocalypse itself crashing down on everyone for no reason except that, well, it must be time. I told you – but he never actually says why. At least in Malachi there was some reason for the misery people suffered, and in its own weird way so, too, in Paul. But in the gospel we heard this morning, there is none, no reason at all. You all maybe didn't start the fire but you will go through it, he tells them. By the power and grace of God you will endure it, but don't look for any reason for it, any justification. Worlds end, and you will see their glory pass before your eyes like fire through a field of wheat, leaving nothing behind but ash, smoke, and stubble, the memory of what was, and the need to accept what now is. To come out of it morally unscathed is the best that we can hope for, at least in this passage. Perhaps that is the deeper, darker lesson of all three of them.

Coming through life morally unscathed is no small feat, we should admit. This is because it is not easy to live without causing oneself, or suffering, moral injury. That is, it is not easy to live without doing things that are shameful, and in any case all have sinned and fall short of the glory. It is not easy to live without witnessing things that none should see, even if we had little part in making them happen.

Moral injury, though, and its wounds are not easy to see, except when one witnesses another's attempts to cope with them go awry. Many a person who on the outside looks fine has been wounded in the soul by what they've done or witnessed in combat, at work, or under abuse, from wrongs they could not avoid or avert to injuries they could not prevent or cure. One may have survived what others could not, and feel the guilt that can come from that. Some who are beset by moral injury turn to drink, to drugs, or to other attempts to soothe a wound that will not heal. Some become angry, others bitter, and still others hopeless and negative, lashing out with no sense of limit or proportion. They do this because they are hurt and ashamed by what they have done, by what they have left undone, or by what they have witnessed and cannot forget. The deed in question might've been unavoidable, or

the lesser of two evils where there was no third choice. One may have caused an accident; one may have killed in self-defense. One may have launched the missile not at the bad guys, but a school. One may be racked with what Eliot's Yeats set among the gifts reserved for age, in "Little Gidding:" "the memory of things ill-done and done to others' harm, which once you took as exercise of virtue." "Then," he continues, "fools' approval stings, and honor stains." How bitter it would be to gain the whole world, yet in so doing to lose one's soul. But whatever one did, one is stuck with it, until grace is abounding, healing the soul and setting us free from the burden of what we cannot forget.

As the classic form of our confession has it, the memory of these things is grievous unto us, and the burden of them is intolerable. Be they sins or be they shames, we cannot bear them without help. But Thou, O Lord, art the one whose property it is to have Mercy, and Thou it is who makes the Sun of Righteousness arise, with healing in its wings for sins and wounds and moral injuries also.

The endurance before atrocities that today's gospel promises is a type of that healing. The freedom that comes from letting go of one's shame at one could not endure or change is another. Neither comes easily to us, or without God's grace. Both are given freely to us, if we let ourselves accept them. That we may be fit for the work before us, and cause no more wrong or pain, let us accept both the endurance and the freedom, forgiving ourselves and others as we have been forgiven, and soaring aloft on those wings of healing, under a bright, new sunrise. *Amen.*