



Emmaus Road: The Transfigured One

Malachi 4:1-6

Rev. Thomas G. James
Washington Street UMC
February 14, 2021

Over the past month and half, we've been looking at God's love in the incarnate being of Jesus Christ as we've considered the stories Jesus possibly told to the two disciples walking along the Emmaus Road following Jesus' resurrection. Luke's Gospel tells us that Jesus explained how he was the Messiah using the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures, from Moses through the prophets. We've looked at Jesus as the unlikely king, who was a suffering servant, hailing from the lineage of David, born of the city Bethlehem, the Son of God, who helped these downtrodden disciples realize that Jesus's death, and his body's absence from the grave, were indeed the fulfillment of God's promised Messiah. Though his arrival did not fulfill the visions of the disciples, the expectations of one to ride in like a shining knight upon his flanked steed, Jesus fulfilled God's promise to redeem the people from their brokenness.

There are many stories that Jesus might have used in his apologetics with the disciples on that walk to Emmaus. We could spend many more weeks highlighting varying Old Testament texts that Jesus can be understood to fulfill. As a colleague of mine quoted the other day, Pastor Brian Zahnd offers, "These writers of the New Testament ... they're just nuts about Jesus. When they read the Old Testament, they're gonna find him everywhere, and they're gonna talk him up." There is no shortage of Old Testament references in the Gospels that highlight Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises of God through the prophets, because the prophets make a lot of promises about what the future holds.

But with Lent beginning this Wednesday, we are closing out this worship series today. To do so, I want to utilize the final text that closes out the Old Testament. That's right, our text for this morning found in Malachi 4:1-6 offers to us the last scripture that is found in our Old Testament.

Keep in mind, as Jesus is walking this road with the disciples, he's highlighting some of the prophecies from the Old Testament that can corroborate his identity as the Messiah. So, let's consider, how does this text point to Jesus?

We looked at another text from Malachi a couple weeks back, but as a quick refresher, Malachi is serving as a prophet about 500 years prior to Christ's birth. He is writing to the people Israel who have returned from exile, but who are lamenting that the greatness they had known during the time of David and Solomon has not returned. The temple has not been restored to its former glory. They are still waiting to live into the fulness of life the promised land offers.

In this extended time of waiting, many have turned away from God. This lack of faithfulness has grown significantly among God's people. The first three chapters of Malachi are effectively offering a trial over God's people – will they be found to be faithful or not? Even during this season of unfaithfulness, there

are some who have remained faithful. This group of the faithful feared for their well-being at the expense of the unfaithful – would they suffer because of the wrongdoing of others?

As we reach this final conclusion in chapter 4, we find a rather harsh verdict for the unfaithful. “The day is coming,” says the prophet, “burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.”

But for the faithful, there is a projected hope. Malachi continues, “For you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. ... You shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet.”

Did you notice the shift in language between verse 1 and 2? Verse 1 uses third-person pronouns to refer to those who do evil. Malachi defines them as “the arrogant,” and “them.” But, when referring to the faithful, Malachi says, “you;” “*you* shall tread down, and *they* will be ashes.” There’s a clear expectation that the unfaithful aren’t reading this text. This is an invitation to those who are obedient to God’s covenant.

As a text written to those who believe they are among the faithful, we have to expect that the disciples on the Emmaus Road considered themselves in this grouping referred to as, “you.” Certainly they felt like they were among those who would have the luxury of walking on the ashes of the arrogant and the evildoers. For a historically oppressed people who were most often at the lash end of the whip, such a yearning should rather be expected.

Admittedly, try as we might, for many of us, this hope – this desire to have the scales turned against the evil doers – is one of mitigated expectation. See, unlike the Jews who had long experienced the oppression of the empires of their time, here in 21st Century America, our majority population has not played the role of the Israel, we have played the role of the oppressive empire. If we’re being honest, for too long, the privileged white population that chained, enslaved, oppressed, redlined, and marginalized those with more melanin in their skin are more akin to the Egyptians and the Babylonians than we are the people Israel.

So to help us better understand what might be going through the minds of these disciples on the Emmaus Road, I want to offer the thoughts of Professor and Author Rodney Sadler, Jr. who, in speaking from the African American perspective regarding Malachi, says, “Our celebration is not in relishing the misfortune of others. Instead, it is dependent on the fact that sufferers cannot be empowered until those forces responsible for their subjugation are finally over.”ⁱ To fully appreciate the promise of this text, one must have some empathetic grasp on the weight of marginalization and oppression.

The hope of the faithful was not for the doom and gloom of their oppressors, it was for their own chain-breaking freedom.

In utilizing this text to define himself as the Messiah on that road to Emmaus, Jesus was going to have to help these disciples who were awaiting such liberation understand how his witness offered such freedom. How is it that Jesus was the fulfillment of this condemning verdict upon the unfaithful?

Let's go back to the text: in verse 4, Malachi offers, "Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel." In invoking Moses, Malachi is inviting the faithful to remember the Ten Commandments. Scholar David Petersen offers, "Remembering torah involves something more concrete than recollecting earlier deeds." This is not just recitation, it's about obedience.ⁱⁱ

Here, at the end of the Old Testament text, Malachi is offering, not just an epilogue to *his* writings, but an epilogue to the whole of the Old Testament text. It is a final reminder of God's covenant. The covenant has not ended, it is to be maintained.

Malachi continues, "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes."

First a call to remember Moses, and then a promise to send the prophet Elijah. Elijah was a successful and most beloved prophet. "Through his instrumentality, Israel had turned to [God] and away from Ba'al."ⁱⁱⁱ There was a hope of his eventual return, and it's promised here by Malachi.

So, in this concluding text of the Old Testament, the faithful are told to turn back to the covenant made with Moses, and to expect the fulfillment of God's covenant in the coming of Elijah.

Fast-forward some 520 years, and we arrive in Jesus' day. I want to read from Luke's narrative account in Luke 9:28-31. It reads, "Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem."

This is the story of the Transfiguration. In the presence of Peter, James, and John, Moses and Elijah appeared with the Lord, and a voice called out from heaven, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

Do you not think Jesus would have used this story with those disciples on the Emmaus Road?

"Remember the last thing you heard from the prophets," Jesus would have said. "To look to Moses, and to expect Elijah?" In the presence of the disciples, these prophets appeared with Jesus, and it was proclaimed from the heavens, "This is my Son!" What evidence more do you want?

Now, the disciples on the Emmaus Road didn't have Luke's account, they would have had to take Jesus at his word. But we have the text, so let's use it. Going back, the final line of Malachi in verse 6 reads, "He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse."

In Luke 9, beginning with verse 37, which immediately follows the story of the Transfiguration, Luke writes, "On the next day, when he had come down from the mountain, a man from the crowd shouted,

“Teacher, I beg you to look at my son. A Spirit seizes him. It throws him into convulsions until he foams at the mouth.” ... Jesus said, “Bring your son here.” Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.”

You think the Gospel authors didn't know what they were doing? Immediately after telling the story of Jesus in the presence of Moses and Elijah, Luke tells us a story of a child and their parent being reconnected – a symbolic reminder of Malachi's final prophecy.

These stories are told with intention – and no doubt, Jesus would have used them to help those disbelieving disciples on the Emmaus Road have a greater understanding of who Jesus is as the Messiah, the Son of God.

The narrative lines up with the prophecy, but there's still that looming question, if Jesus is the fulfillment of the condemning verdict upon the unfaithful, how do the oppressed find freedom?

To answer this question, we need to finish the journey down the road to Emmaus.

Picking up in Luke 24:28, we read, “As they came near the village to which they were going, [Jesus] walked ahead as if he were going on. They urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So [Jesus] went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ... That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. [The eleven] were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then [the two] told them what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

The freeing nature of Christ does not promise that evil will immediately be swept away. The invitation of God in the new covenant is not to watch as those who turn from God burn in our midst. Malachi concludes by offering that in the reuniting of children to their parents, the Lord avoids the need to strike the land with a curse. The promise is that, in the person of Christ, in the conquering of even death itself, we are offered a new life that is defined by reconciled relationships. It is set upon the promise of hope that overcomes fear in the midst of community.

These disciples model that. They had invited Jesus to stay with them for the day was nearly over. It was too late and too unsafe to be out travelling the roads – and yet, having encountered the Risen Christ, these two men jumped up and ran back down the very roads they had just travelled to find the eleven disciples in Jerusalem. They put any fear of travelling those roads behind them, for proclaiming the fulfillment of God's promise in Christ was worth the risk of running the roads at night.

This is the fulfillment of the promise – that evil, that oppression, that hatred do not win out. Death does not have the final say. That promise, that invitation, that salvation, that hope and love is freeing. And in the person of Christ, whom we find to be the fulfillment of the promise of the prophets, we hear such a declaration made by God. This is the way of life. This is the fulfillment of my covenant. This

is what you've been longing for. So receive this gift, receive this offering, receive this promise, my love *shall* reign forever and ever. Amen, and Amen.

ⁱ Rodney S. Sadler, Jr. *Lectionary Commentary*. Published March 16, 2008. <http://theafricanamericanlectionary.com>. Retrieved February 10, 2021.

ⁱⁱ David L. Petersen. *Zechariah 9-14 and Malachi: A Commentary (The Old Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

ⁱⁱⁱ Petersen.