

Sermon Text for December 1, 2024

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Matthew 17:9-13 The Incarnate Redeemer

December 1, 2024

First Sunday in Advent: Hope

First Pres, Strasburg

Main Point: Jesus prepares us for the arrival of His day through ‘serve and return’.

So what? Let’s stay in the conversation with Jesus.

Good morning! It’s so good to worship with you this morning! I hope you had wonderful Thanksgiving meals, rainy football games and fun. Jon and I celebrated with my family first and then his. We also celebrated our Anniversary. In June 1998, he asked me to marry him and I promptly packed up my apartment in Lancaster and moved to a rough neighborhood in West Philadelphia. With a group of college students, we were learning about God’s heart for people of all income levels. God was calling each of us to a ministry of generosity. He owns cattle on a thousand hills and counts the hairs on our heads. He can supply all that we need.

Read Matthew 17:9-13

Pray: Good and gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing to you.

As Pastor Bob said a few weeks ago, the Gospel of Matthew passed a marker in the road and is now moving toward Jerusalem and Lent. It is a unique opportunity to enter Advent in light of Easter.

Our first Scripture comes from Malachi, who offers the very last words of the Old Testament. Of course, Matthew begins the New. Our two passages today have many parallels, but they also diverge in an important way, which we’ll look at.

Both our Malachi passage and our Matthew passage speak of the Glory of God. Malachi the prophet promises that the sun (not son) of righteousness will come. He

gives us a visual image that is hard to recreate in our minds eye. It is like putting soap and radio together in the same joke. The solar body that holds the earth does not normally track in our thought process about justice and righteousness. And, yet, here it is in Malachi. Matthew tells us in 17:2 (before our passage) that Jesus' "face shone like the sun." On the mountain, Jesus and three disciples experience something otherworldly and equally difficult to imagine: Jesus' face beams with light. Just as we never stare at the noonday sun, the disciples bend down in awe. Together, Malachi and Matthew describe the nearly unimaginable glory uniquely associated with the person of Jesus.

In Matthew 17:9, Jesus tells them, Don't tell anyone until after I am raised from the dead. Christ does not trust that people will understand clearly what this picture of his glory means. And, so he knows the disciples will only be able to "talk responsibly" about the glory of God after his trial and mysterious re-entry into life. But, Jesus is fully confident these history bending events will occur. He is faithful to give himself to the suffering and death that are coming. He is confident they are the path of righteousness. And so, he must prepare his followers for them.

I said there were many parallels between Malachi 4 and Matthew 17. In fact, when the disciples ask about the scribes and Elijah, it is because they know Malachi 4.

Scribes say vs. Jesus says:

In Matthew 17:10, the disciples ask, why do the scribes say Elijah must come first. You may remember, Elijah is the prophet who did not die but rather was caught up into heaven- something of an ascension- without dying. It's quite a notable and peculiar claim to fame. Elijah was taken up, in the time of the Kings, hundreds of years before Malachi. But, Malachi (in 4:5) promises that Elijah *will* be sent by God *before* 'the day of the Lord comes'.

Jesus confirms Malachi: In 17:11, he says, Yes- Elijah does come first, [and will restore all things].

But, he goes further... and corrects the scribes who remember Malachi's promise. In 17:12, Jesus says, "but I say to you" and then continues to clarify exactly what he knows.

Jesus tells us that "Elijah has already come and they did what they pleased with him." While Malachi does not say anything about the death of Elijah or John, in Mal. 4:5, he does anticipate "the great and terrible day of the Lord". Reading only Malachi, we would reasonable wonder at that description. What is it? An amazing climax of joy and triumph and celebration or a tragedy of tremendous sorrow? We are left wondering how it will be both glorious and tragic?

Jesus bridges from the disciples concern about prophecy, and the scribes and lead them back to the important topic at hand. He finishes Matthew 17:12, by saying that they will also do to the Son of Man whatever they please. Elijah returned in the form of John, suffered wrongful death. This means the day of the Lord is near and Jesus must prepare them so they understand it when it happens.

And so, the scribes get the facts correct, but Jesus understands what they mean

The scribes are smart, where Jesus is wise

The scribes know the prophecy, but Jesus knows the prophecy is fulfilled

The scribes anticipate the presence of Elijah, but it is Jesus who declares these hopes are realized.

Jesus is understands and names that what was promised is happening.

When I was about 8 and 9 years old, my Dad played tennis once a week with some friends. With three siblings, life in my family was full and chaotic. I am the third- middle child and I think my parents figured some time one on one with Dad would be good for me. So, I took a lesson, watched him play doubles and did my homework.

When you're learning tennis, the best thing is to keep a volley going for as long as you can (Cat meme: head back and forth watching the ball) Of course, not when you're competing. More hits means winning more later.

“Serve and return” is also the name for something fundamentally human- Caregivers and infants do this. The infant notices something- the caregiver's attention follows- eyes reconnect as she names or validates the thing- all is well. Serve and return is both how we develop from infants into grown-ups. Logging countless repetitions is the foundation of maturity.

For 26 years now, Jon and I have served and returned with endlessly new emotions and topics. But not serve and return is not just for babies or marriage partners, but all people experience serve and return in healthy and happy relationships.

In the wake of Jesus' anticipated- and blasted- glory, Jesus plays 'serve and return' with his disciples: It is how Jesus leads and prepares them for the suffering to come. Their attention darts to the scribes and the Malachi prophecy. He meets them there. Then, he puts his label/ name/ correction on it. The prophetic promises of Jesus' future, which felt like threat to them, becomes a bit safer, and they move- ever so slightly closer to making sense of paradox which is the glory and the suffering of Jesus. In Advent, Jesus the Son of Man enters not only into humanity in a general way, but into the very details of their attention. He tracks with them. Initially follows their eyes, in order to lead them. He validates their concerns by paying attention with them but doesn't leave them lost in the misguided teaching of others or the world.

Why is it important to Jesus that the disciples understand the role of Elijah and John the Baptist in the arrival of the Messiah?

Mal 4:6 promises that Elijah will turn hearts back to one another. A family reconciliation at the heart level. Israel as family. John the Baptist called Israel to repent. He called the scribes and Pharisees to demonstrate the love and hope. He

called them to demonstrate the fruit of repentance- not just turned hearts, but actions that put things right. Baptism is the mark of a new beginning- a new way of living.

Jesus makes clear: John the Baptist fulfills the prophecy that Elijah must return. Both prophets instigate movements of people coming back into 'serve and return' relationships with each other and with God through Jesus. And, back into communion.

This repentance, responsiveness prepares Israel- and all of us- to receive the redemptive work of Christ. It prepares us for the paradox and the mystery of Jesus' suffering and for our own suffering. It also prepares us to be present and supportive to others who are suffering. Jesus does not leave the disciples out to dry but loves them by preparing them for the glory and the pain. So, in this Advent season, the Presence of Jesus prepares you and I for what life is handing us, right now. Jesus prepares us for the arrival of His day through 'serve and return'. So, Let's stay in the conversation with Jesus.