

Sermon Draft

Text: Malachi 3:13–18

Sermon: “Hard Words”

The Last Sunday of the Church Year is also been called “Christ the King Sunday.” Christ is King of all. He fills all things and holds all things together. ***“He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.”*** (Colossians 1:18)

In the *Gospel*, Pilate mocked Jesus and mocked the Jews with his inscription: ***“This is the King of the Jews!”*** (Luke 23:38) But Jesus *is* King yes, from the cross and he shall come into his kingdom. Going to the cross, Jesus is remarkably in control, warning the daughters of Jerusalem (23:28–31); praying, ***“Father, forgive them”*** and receiving the repentant thief: ***“Today you will be with me in Paradise.”***

Christ is the King who could not save himself but by his sacrifice saves *us*. In him we take refuge, for he is God in our flesh, given up for us. He is our ***“very present help in trouble.”*** (Psalm 46:1) ***“Remember me,”*** prayed the repentant thief, ***“when you come into your kingdom.”*** (Luke 23:42)

In our *Old Testament Reading*, Malachi says that ***“a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD. . . . ‘They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, . . . and I will spare them.’”*** (Malachi 3:16–17) The Lord is King, and he is coming again!

Malachi, which means “My Messenger,” is the last Old Testament prophet before John the Baptist. His actual name could be Malachi, or he could be an otherwise unnamed prophet whom God called “My Messenger.”

Perhaps a Levite who has been watching the corruption of both priests and people in the time of the second temple, about 430 years before Christ was born, Malachi is disgusted because they have despised the Lord's table and offered polluted sacrifices. The Lord speaks through him to call the people and their spiritual leaders to repentance.

Christians are called to be God's messengers today. We are to speak *up* for God, but more and more today we hear strong words, harsh words, spoken against God, words of defiance. Words by which people think to declare independence from God.

"Your words have been hard against me," the Lord says through his prophet Malachi in our text today, and he calls his people to account for those words, their hard words against him. Evildoers think they can put God to the test and even escape.

As we see and experience all the evil around us we are tempted to say, "It's useless to serve God!" "Where's my cut? When do I get what's coming to me?" Hello? God? Are you really there?" As though we can cajole God into doing what we want, put him to the test, bend him to our will, whether it's really for our good or not.

So the Lord, by his prophet, bids us look up from ourselves to see him, to fear him, to repent and stand in awe of him, and to trust his promises. We cannot speak against him or test him, but he bids us look back and remember all his works for us. Even when it seems God is far away, when we are tempted to speak against him or put him to the test, he leads us to remember his promises, to remember that he will never forget his people.

We have no need to test God or speak against him, because God always keeps His promises and in Jesus makes us His treasured possession.

How do we know God keeps his promises? Our book of remembrance is written down here in the Scriptures, the Word of God. And the Word of God does what it says, brings what it promises.

Quite appropriate to this Last Sunday of the Church Year, Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. It's God's last word to Israel before the fulfillment of his greatest promise. Next time God comes around; it's going to be in person, in the person of the promised baby in Bethlehem. It's going to be four hundred more years of waiting, but he is going to come. What God's Word says, happens.

Just as when God's Word in the flesh, Jesus, told the repentant thief, **"Today you will be with me in Paradise,"** and that's exactly what happened. He was **"delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred [by Jesus himself to his kingdom, for in him] we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."**

(Colossians 1:13–14)

The crowd around Jesus at the cross spoke harsh words, hard words: **"He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!"** Jesus responded with soft words but far greater words, words far stronger than any other: **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."**

Paul allows us to step back and see the effect on the whole cosmos of God's Word in Jesus:

“that in him all things hold together, . . . and through him [God reconciles] to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

In other words, promises were kept. The Word of God was fulfilled in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Now he makes you and me his treasured possession, just as he promised Israel: ***“They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession.”*** Already a thousand years before Malachi, God had said this to his Old Testament people: ***“If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples.”*** (Exodus 19:5) Now in the New Testament age, he says it to you: ***“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God’s] own possession.”*** (1 Peter 2:9)

For the LORD has compassion on us. The LORD says, ***“I will spare them as a man spares his son.”***

The irony here is that, while a man spares his son, in the case of *this* son, the Son of God, God did not spare him, did not have compassion on him, but sent him to the cross. He gave him up to suffering and death. And Jesus could not save himself from the cross if he wanted to save us. But God did it all so that he might have compassion on us, might put our sins on Jesus, and make us his sons and daughters. His promise of everlasting love and compassion is fulfilled in Christ.

So let us repent of our desire to doubt the goodness of God and turn from our need to put Him to the test; he always keeps his promises! Jesus is the proof. Jesus is the guarantee that God’s Word is true.

Our faith may be put to the test by our circumstances, but God's purpose is only to refine us, to strip away from us anything that might separate us from him, and to show us ever more clearly Christ *for us*.

Even when we forget, he remembers us. He makes us his own. He restores us when we fall: "**Father, forgive them.**" He remembers us when he comes into his kingdom. He gives us paradise. He has made peace for us, reconciling all things to himself.

He makes us his treasured possession, putting his name on us in Baptism and speaking his forgiveness. By the power of his Word in Baptism, he unites us with the death and resurrection of Jesus. For his Word does not simply convey information; his Word does what it says. It brings what it promises. We can count on it.

Baptized into Christ, we have been clothed in Christ. We are marked out for God's own possession. We bear his name. He gives us his Spirit as the down payment on all his promises (Ephesians 1:14).

By his Word, he has spared us, had compassion on us, saying your sin is forgiven you. And when he speaks, it is done! (Colossians 1:13–14)

In the Sacrament we "do this in remembrance" of him, he remembers his promise, and by his Word he places into our mouth his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. His Word does what it says.

So whatever our circumstance in life otherwise, we will go out from this place as God's treasured possession. We live in the promises kept. We have his Spirit to guide us and speak up as opportunity arises.

And as this Last Sunday of the Church Year directs us to look forward to Jesus we remember His promises knowing that His Word is sure.

“He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.” (Colossians 1:18) Your name is written in his book of life (Luke 10:20). He will remember you forever.

In the name of Jesus. Amen