

# SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

## Second Sunday of Advent

December 5, 2021

### Psalm 66:1–12 (ESV):

1 Shout for joy to God, all the earth;

2 sing the glory of his name;

give to him glorious praise!

3 Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds!

So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you.

4 All the earth worships you

and sings praises to you;

they sing praises to your name.” Selah

5 Come and see what God has done:

he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man.

6 He turned the sea into dry land;

they passed through the river on foot.

There did we rejoice in him,

7 who rules by his might forever,

whose eyes keep watch on the nations—

let not the rebellious exalt themselves. Selah

8 Bless our God, O peoples;

let the sound of his praise be heard,

9 who has kept our soul among the living

and has not let our feet slip.

10 For you, O God, have tested us;

you have tried us as silver is tried.

11 You brought us into the net;

you laid a crushing burden on our backs;

12 you let men ride over our heads;

we went through fire and through water;  
yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.

**First Reading:** Malachi 3:1–6 (ESV):

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

5 “Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

### **Robbing God**

6 “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

**EPISTLE: Philippians 1:2–11 (ESV):**

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Thanksgiving and Prayer**

3 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4 always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. 7 It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you

may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

**Gospel: Luke 3:1–20 (ESV):**

### **John the Baptist Prepares the Way**

**3** In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, **2** during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. **3** And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **4** As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

**5** Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall become straight,  
and the rough places shall become level ways,  
**6** and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

**7** He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? **8** Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. **9** Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

**10** And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” **11** And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” **12** Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” **13** And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” **14** Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

**15** As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, **16** John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **17** His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

**18** So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. **19** But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, **20** added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

Sermon 49 – Second Sunday of Advent

“Make Israel Great Again”

Malachi 3:1-7

Dear friends,

Losing hope is the first step to losing faith, something we can all see in the world today. It's not a guarantee, but it is a first step, and a dangerous one to take. In our Old Testament lesson, Israel demonstrates this to the T, but the lesson itself is more on God's response to it. God knows how fragile we are, how weak our hopes are. He knows, and He takes steps to make sure that this be a good thing, that we are strengthened in the way that we need to be, both as individuals and as a group. This lesson is God's presented solution to the problem. It predicts what Jesus and John the Baptizer will eventually

accomplish. For us, this lesson is a reminder that God is always at work to strengthen our faith and toughen us up for the task ahead. That task is simple: Believe and hope 'till you die.

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament, the final thing that God has to say before He will go silent for another roughly four hundred years. It is a short book, to the point, so I'm going to try do the same. The Israelites in Malachi were back in the Promised Land after their exile, they'd rebuilt the temple, they were starting to rebuild their capital city. They were essentially having to start from square one in reconstructing their whole nation. It is a big task, there is a lot to do, and a lot of it takes a long time. These people want Israel back, but Israel was built over generations, hundreds of years. I don't know if this has ever happened to you in your life, if you've ever tried to rebuild a long-term project, but it can be really frustrating, and it was for the Jews here too. It seems like they just got disgusted with how half-finished it all was. The temple was there, and the city was sorta coming together, but everything was just messy, nothing was finished. It is so much harder to rebuild than build. These are people living amidst the ruins of everything they'd lost, constantly being reminded of everything they'd lost, and they try and try to get back what they've lost, but they can never get it all. So they lost their hope. Remember, the exiles spent an entire generation dreaming of what it would be like to live in the Promised Land. They were remembering what they had when they were a big powerful nation. The reality of living in the Promised Land, starting from square one, was a bitter blow to them. There is nothing quite so disappointing as an unrealized dream. Nothing hits you like that. Israel learns this when they try to recolonize and reconstruct the land they called home.

What did this loss of hope, this frustration look like? Oddly, it looked like normal society problems. Wage fraud was one, workers were not being paid fairly. A corrupt and largely indifferent priesthood was another. Malachi spends a lot of time taking the priests to task for how they've let slip their job. These guys were taking bribes to bring sub-average sacrifices to the Lord, and the Lord was not in the mood for that. Justice had lapsed, so bribing was going on in the courts as well, and most important of all the

teaching of God's ways, God's laws, was not happening like it should. The Israelites weren't hearing the truth. God hates this.

God spends the first couple chapters pointing out these problems. In this one He turns to the solution. **“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.”** If something like this happened at the time, it is not recorded, and so, best we can tell, God is talking about John the Baptizer here. John the Baptizer will not appear for another four hundred years. So this is a long-term solution, and it is their solution. The people of Israel wanted things to be like they remembered, they wanted to make Israel great again. That never happens. In not too much time, Israel is going to be conquered first by Macedonians under Alexander the Great, then by Romans. Israel will never be great again. Israel never was great. If it was, God was great, and that is what He is trying to tell them.

Moreover, God is hinting that this isn't about Israel anymore. Their nation is gone, their ideas of greatness are just not in His mind anymore. Notice that God doesn't tell them this. They're not ready for it yet. They're not ready to be told that their days of being the big powerful nation on the block are gone and gone forever. God's got a different approach in mind, and He introduces them to it without telling them it outright. All He says right now is that He's going to send a messenger to prepare for His return to the temple. The next time God returns to the temple will be when Jesus enters the temple as a baby. God is comforting them on their terms. I'm coming back. He just doesn't tell them that when He comes back, it will be in a way they do not – and at this point cannot – appreciate.

What's changing? Everything is changing. Jesus brings about this change. After Jesus, no one – including God Himself – will care much about Israel as a nation anymore. Israel, the geopolitical middle eastern entity, is meaningless. Through Jesus, God will build a new Israel, a new chosen people, from every nation under heaven. It won't be about bloodline, who your parents were, it will be about what you believe and the God you worship. This was always how it was supposed to be, but it got mixed up with all this

Israelite patriotism and just kind of got lost. Instead of animals constantly sacrificed, Jesus Himself will sacrifice Himself on the cross to pay for all sin for all time. He will do it to change hearts, and from that a new man will rise in each one of us. It's a big change.

God describes some of this next, but He is careful to do it in terms that are familiar. **“2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord.”** When Jesus appears, He will purify us all, like ore. Ore is refined by heating it up until the slag runs off and the metal stands alone. Jesus appears as one who will judge between men and men and divide them into two categories: The faithful and the unfaithful. He will make it absolutely clear who is pure and who is not by purifying those whom He wills. This sounds ominous. Maybe its supposed to be. For Christians, though, this is our bread and butter. Jesus will purify us at His coming. He did it back then, He still does it to you now. He takes everything unworthy in you and He just burns it all away, and the only thing that's left is what He has created you. The pure faith that He wants you to have. You believe in Jesus. You are here. This is the result of that coming, all of you. That's lovely.

**“5 Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.”** This is the cool nuance to it for me. God isn't ignoring what His people are and need now. In Malachi's time, the people needed their hope, they needed to be shaken out of their apathy, their despair, their frustration. God provides them concrete proof that He's watching, and He's going to make sure it happens. It isn't all just in the future, its a thing they can make use of right when they hear it.

Same for us. You and I are not Israel, but we are stuck in many of the same potholes as Israel found themselves in at this time. Israel got hung up on the good old days, and we do too sometimes. I'm not going to tell you those days never existed, or never had any

value, they did and your memories of them are important to you. But we do not need things to be like they used to be in the good old days in order to be who we are. That is not what makes us the people of God. You are God's children because you belong to Jesus, no matter how many people are or are not in church. It still hurts when it looks like things are going downhill, but Malachi reminds us that God has exquisite plans for every downhill slide. Likewise with the country. Patriotism is all fine and dandy, but you are not Americans first. You are Christians first, and as a Christian you worship the cross, not the flag. Now, many of you have tried to do both throughout the years, good for you. God calls us to be good citizens of the country we call home. But I remind you that God calls us to be good citizens of the country we are in now, regardless of what that looks like. You may think it a faded shadow of its former glory. So be it. Whether America waxes or wanes is something we Christians are uniquely able to have patience with, because we know America is just like Israel. It's a country with people in it. That's not what matters to God in the end, and that is not what we are in the end. What we are is God's children, regardless of where we call home or what language we speak. These things can become idols. I've done it. I've got my golden past that I look to, wishing it could be that way again. Don't let it stop you from seeing the good work God has done in you now through Jesus.

**“6 For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. 7 From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them.”** From the days of your fathers we have sinned. The sins might've changed, but we sinned. It's always been this way. I know it looks different now, but God reminds us that the real problem is never the country or the church but the heart, our hearts. But the Lord does not change. He does not fail to punish wickedness, He does not fail to bring justice to those that truly need it. The Lord does not change. Because of that, you are not consumed by His wrath. Instead, you are embraced by His love.

Amen.