

THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGIN'
Rev. Jason Santalucia

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Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 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; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

One of the clearest memories I have is the day my wife, Daisy, told me she was pregnant with our first child. We were living in Northern California, and we'd been trying for about a year, and we were both starting to feel like maybe it was never going to happen.

So, it didn't sink in right away, but once it did, I got really excited, and I started imagining what it was going to be like having a son (because I was a hundred percent sure it was going to be a boy) and I started picturing all the things we were going to do together: going fishing, building models, playing catch.

Pretty soon, however, reality started setting in. One day Daisy handed me a book and told me to read it. It was about saving for college, and buying life insurance, and adding beneficiaries, and all these other things that made me feel overwhelmed and anxious. Then we started spending lots of time at Target, sometimes two or three trips in one weekend, shopping for baby clothes, baby monitors,

strollers, car seats, high chairs, diaper pails, and on and on and on. Then everyone we knew who already had kids started telling us we should go on some dates because once the baby came it would be three or four years before we'd have another night out, just the two of us.

But the biggest reality check of all came a few months later when we did an ultrasound, and the doctor told us the baby had some physical markers that could indicate Down's Syndrome, and the only way to know for sure was to do an amnio, but there was a chance it could cause a miscarriage.

So, we decided not to risk it, and we spent the rest of the pregnancy converting one corner of our bedroom into a nursery, and going to birth classes, and dreaming of what our child would look like—but also bracing ourselves for the possibility that we might have a child with some serious issues, and wondering whether we could handle it.

Sometimes even the happiest moments in life are mixed with apprehension, and even the most joyful news can also be terrifying.

Well, in the first reading today, I think Malachi's audience must be feeling a similar mix of emotions. He's addressing the people of Israel at a specific moment in their history—after the return from exile in Babylon and after the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

Those were dark times for Israel, but God was faithful and stood by them and got them through it. So, you might think that now people would be more committed to God than ever. But that's not what Malachi sees when he looks around. Instead of commitment, he sees people giving God their leftovers. Instead of devotion, he sees people going through the motions. Instead of justice, he sees people abusing the weak and exploiting the vulnerable.

Even though Israel has given up on God, however, God hasn't given up on Israel. Malachi announces that God is going to send "a messenger of the covenant"—someone who will set things right and make Israel "pleasing to the Lord" once again. But it's not going to be painless, Malachi says. When God's messenger comes, he's going to be "like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap." He's going to burn away all the imperfections and scrub out all the stains.

So, in the end, Israel will be pure and clean again, and the relationship between God and God's people will be mended. But getting there isn't going to be easy. It's going to be a long and difficult process—sort of like when you find out you're going to be a parent, and you're not sure you're ready. Yes, there's a lot to look forward to, and a lot to be excited about. But there are also a lot of worries, and a lot of doubts, and a lot of sleepless nights.

I think the basic issue here is change and how even change that's welcome can still bring with it a lot of anxiety. The end result might be wonderful, it might be the answer to all our prayers, but there might be some major struggles along the way.

We see that in the second reading, as well. John is talking about the coming of God's salvation, and it sounds pretty good: Every valley shall be filled, every mountain shall be made low, all the crooked paths will be made straight, and all the rough ways will be made smooth. Sounds like a walk in the park. But if you read just a little bit further, in the next few verses, things get a whole lot darker. John starts talking about "the wrath to come," and he says, "Even now, the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Yikes. It doesn't sound like there's anything wonderful about that.

But you know, it's not like we have a choice when it comes to change—especially the change that God brings. God's future is coming whether we like it or not. "The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight," Malachi says, "indeed, he is coming"—emphasis on is.

Sometimes we forget that. Sometimes we forget that God is always bringing us into a new day. Sometimes we act as though we can go through life and keep everything the same. But when has God ever called someone to stay the same? And when did Jesus ever say, "Follow me, and be the same exact person you've always been"?

That's just not how the life of faith works.

So, the choice we have is not whether we let God bring change into our lives. The choice is how we respond when that change comes. Do we go into it kicking and screaming, or do we trust that what God has waiting for us on the other side of that change is a new life full of meaning and joy?

I was terrified when Daisy woke me up one night around eleven and told me the baby was coming. I didn't feel ready, but what choice did I have? That baby wasn't going to wait for me to pull myself together. So, I jumped out of bed and got dressed and grabbed the suitcase from the closet, and we drove to the hospital in Santa Rosa.

It was a difficult labor, and it lasted all night, but finally Jinju was born at around seven o'clock in the morning, and she didn't have any issues. So, after the

nurses cleaned her up and did all their tests, I stuck around for a while. But then Daisy needed to rest, and I needed to go home and let our dog out. So, I said goodbye, and I took the elevator down to the lobby, and I staggered out into the parking lot, completely exhausted. I remember the sun was shining, and the sky was a brilliant blue, and it was like I'd never seen morning before.

On the way home, the only CD I had in the car was The Essential Bob Dylan. So, I popped it in to keep myself awake, and I ended up listening to the same song over and over. I'm pretty sure you can guess which one it was. I won't sing it, but I'll read you the words.

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin'
or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'.

Thanks be to God.