

Text: 3 “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, 4 and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Introduction: All of us were shocked again this past Wednesday with the news of another shooting, this time in San Bernardino, CA in which 14 were killed and many more senselessly injured.

But why are we so shocked? We live in a sinful world that is filled with sinful people who are capable of doing terrible things to one another. Furthermore, isn’t this what our Lord told us was going to happen just before his second coming at the end of the world when he returns for judgment? Speaking of that time right before the end of the world Jesus said, **“Then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again...If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.”** (Matthew 24:21,22) If we take our Lord at his word and believe what he says none of this should shock us, even though it saddens us.

If the prophecy concerning the first coming of Christ was fulfilled (It was), we can be sure that the prophecies concerning the second coming of Christ are also being fulfilled! In both, God wants us to be warned and prepare our hearts for the day. He is calling us to repentance and faith. If these events (of terrorism) only bring about shock and panic and do not lead us to a fear of God, then we aren’t seriously listening to God. If we aren’t listening to God, we won’t be ready when he comes. We will be like the five foolish virgins who did not concern themselves to fill their lamps with oil and consequently, weren’t ready when the bridegroom came. They were left behind and could not enter the wedding banquet. (Matthew 25:1-13) God wants us to be ready! Jesus said, **“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”** (Matthew 25:13) God wants us to be with him in heaven, but before that can happen sin needs to be dealt with, not just the sins of terrorists, our sins.

Everything God tells us in his Word this morning was written to prepare us! God is exhorting us: **BE PREPARED!** Fulfillment of the promises concerning Christ’s first coming at Bethlehem leads us to take God’s warning of Christ’s second coming seriously. And when we take God’s warning seriously we will find our comfort in Christ. His love will change our lives.

Maybe we are sleeping spiritually because so much time has passed since Jesus told his disciples that the end of time is near. Peter addressed that drowsiness and doubt even in his own day. (2 Peter 3ff) But remember how much time God took to fulfill the prophecies concerning the first coming of the Messiah. God fulfilled his promise to Abraham 2000 years after choosing him to father a new nation that would be the cradle for that Savior. God will also fulfill the prophecies concerning Christ’s second coming. Indeed even though we patiently wait for that day, it will come upon us like a thief in the night.

1

Let’s note first what God said about the Messiah’s first coming through the prophet Malachi. **3 “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.** Malachi relays the same message from the LORD that Isaiah relayed centuries earlier. We read those words in our Gospel lesson this morning.

1

“A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. ⁶ And all mankind will see God’s salvation.” (Isaiah 40:3) The LORD tells us that the sign of the Messiah’s first coming was “a messenger” coming before him to prepare the hearts of the people. Scripture identifies that messenger as John the Baptist, the son of Elizabeth and Zachariah. (Matthew 3:3ff) John’s father, Zechariah, by inspiration tells us about the mission of his son. **“And you, my child will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way before him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”** (Luke 1:76-79)

The LORD said that John’s purpose was to **“prepare the way before me.”** Through Isaiah the LORD described that preparation in this way, **“⁵ Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. ⁶ And all mankind will see God’s salvation.”** In the Old Testament times before a king made a journey to a distant land, the roads he would travel were improved. Similarly, preparation for the Messiah was made in a moral and spiritual way by the ministry of John. His was a message calling people to repentance. John pointed out sin, so that the people would see a need for a Savior. With the law preaching of John the LORD sought to destroy the thought that man could save himself by his own works. John’s message sought to make man’s mountains and hills of pride low by revealing that no matter how good a life man lived it was not good enough before God. He revealed how crooked man’s life was by comparing it to the straight road the King desired. He worked to make the road for the Messiah smooth by leveling that road by dealing with the bumps of lust, greed, hate and lovelessness. When contrition, that is, sorrow and despair over sin and fear of God’s righteous punishment, was evident John spoke the gospel message that the kingdom of God was at hand, that is, the Savior has come. That Savior came to establish the peace with God that Zachariah spoke of. Faith in the Savior attained that peace.

When imprisoned John sent his disciples to ask Jesus, **“Are you the One who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”** Jesus replied, **“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”** (Matthew 11:4, 5) Jesus reminded John of the things that were predicted concerning the Messiah in the Old Testament (see Isaiah 29:18-21; 35:5,6; 61:1), his healing and life-restoring miracles. Jesus himself assured John in his final hours that he was **“the messenger of the covenant”** that God had promised Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and all his people through whom all nations of the earth would be blessed, the one through whom God would reconcile the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).

2

John’s ministry is still a blessing for us today. Not only does he point out who the “messenger of the covenant” is, Jesus, by proclaiming, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” he also reminds us that we need to repent of our sins to be saved. What sins in your life obstruct the Lord’s coming into your heart today? Maybe you don’t see the urgency of preparing a way for the Lord. Jesus tells us that many in the last days will be living life as they normally do unconcerned about the end and then the end will come suddenly! Then it will be too late for them to repent. Does that describe you? How busy were you last week? What were you busy doing? How did you show the LORD that his coming, and preparing for that coming was the most serious concern of your life? Did you even think about that? You should have! For just as certain as Jesus came the first time at Bethlehem, so also can you be sure that he is coming again to judge the world. Malachi prophesies that coming. **² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.**

2

In Malachi's day, the Levites served God at the temple by offering sacrifices. But the LORD was not pleased with their sacrifices. Their sacrifices revealed that they loved themselves more than God. By offering blind, lame, and sick animals as sacrifices, the Levites and priests were, in effect, despising the Lord. Unless the servants at the temple would take Malachi's rebuke to hear and do what the Lord commanded, the Lord would bring evil upon them and put them out of his presence. On judgment day the Lord would clean up, yes, purify his church. He will be like a refiner's fire purifying his church and a launderer making his church clean with the soap of judgment.

There will be those, however, who bring righteous offerings to the Lord, right and pleasing offerings. These are the offerings of true believers who are members of Judah, the true Church, and citizens of Jerusalem, the city of God, heaven. These are the gifts of God's people given in faith, thankfulness and love for the salvation the LORD earned on the cross for them. Jesus said that "**whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.**" (John 3:16) The gifts of true believers are acceptable to God because they are given in faith like Abel's offering was given in the Garden of Eden (Hebrews 11:4), not to earn salvation, but to thank God for the salvation he has promised and accomplished in Christ Jesus.

On judgment day, what kind of offering will you be bearing as you come before the Lord, your judge? Will you be able to endure the Day of his judgment? Will you be able to stand when he appears? When the Lord separates the believers from the unbelievers, the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:32), what side will you be on? The Lord is coming. There's no doubt about that. As certain as the Lord's first coming is, so also can we be certain that he is coming again for judgment. The signs of his second coming are all being fulfilled, the signs in nature, in the world, in the persecution of the church, in the spread of the gospel, all are being fulfilled right now like never before (see Mt. 24 & 25) Today could be the day. The Lord could come suddenly into our lives as he did in the lives of the 14 who died this past week in San Bernardino or for Judgment Day.

We need to be prepared for either. We brazenly react to these senseless acts of terror and say "they're not going to rob us of our freedom. Fear is not going to stop us from living normally! But the truth is that the fulfillment of these signs ought to change us! God's call to us, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand," is a call to change our lives, change our thinking about our sins, change our thinking about how we are saved from our sins or the necessity of that salvation, change about what we make the priority in our life. Those who are prepared by believing in Jesus for forgiveness of sins and salvation will be acceptable to the Lord. Their last day will not be shocking tragedy. It will be a glorious day of victory and deliverance, yes, a day of joy, not sadness. When we know that we can pray as John did at the end of the Bible, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20)