

Populus Zion (Second Sunday in Advent): December 10, 2023
“Day of Wrath? I Thought This Was Christmas!”

Grace, Mercy, and Peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I really like our hymn for the day. There is much in there that speaks to Advent and the second coming of Christ. First, the tune is not all that chipper, but neither is life in December in the Midwest. But then one gets to the text itself. There is a lot going on in the text. Each verse, at times, seems like a side story that all informs the over-arching story that is the hymn. There is Law and Gospel and it seems to go back and forth, just like my days.

What a beautiful pairing then for the texts that we heard read today. Jesus speaks of His second coming in Luke, and it doesn't sound like much of a happy picture, not for everyone at least. Leading up to Christ's Advent there is much confusion and perplexity in the earth, moon, and stars which causes even more confusion and perplexity among the people of the earth. Death is rampant and evil seems unbridled. While we can worry and fret in a frenzy, we are reminded today, *“Death is struck and nature quaking; All creation is awaking, To its Judge an answer making.”*¹ I do not have an answer to all of the wickedness that is found in our world, or even now placed on display in the Iowa State Capitol, but they will have to give answer, *“When the Judge His seat attaineth And each hidden deed arraigneth, Nothing unavenged remaineth.”*²

Now, most of you know my aversions to using certain illustrations in sermons. They can have a tendency to overshadow the text. Often the illustration is remembered, but not the text. An illustration is supposed to serve the text. Let this then be a cautionary remark and let the hearer understand. Don't get lost in the illustration, but stay with me.

One my favorite Christmas movies is National Lampoons Christmas Vacation. It has some really off-color humor, but in the end it speaks to the heart of family. No matter how bad things get for Clark Griswold, he still takes care of his family and tries to make Christmas great for his family.

¹ Day of Wrath, O Day of Mourning TLH 607:4

² Day of Wrath, O Day of Mourning TLH 607:6

I know he doesn't understand what Christmas is and he is looking in the wrong places. But as I studied through Malachi this week, there is a striking parallel with our Old Testament text. Many of the struggles and terrible memorable moments, happen in the dark. Many of the others happen when one of the members of the family think they are alone.

That is the nature of sin, is it not? Many things happen in the dark. Not just actions themselves, but men try to cover their faults by committing these acts in the dark, in secret, so as no one can see, as if God cannot see. Men and women commit all sorts of sinful, shameful, and dishonorable acts either in the dark, or when they believe they are alone. Sitting behind computer screens, cell phones and internet technology at the finger-tips, one has almost instant access to any world they can dream up, good or bad. The imagination can run wild.

Others will use the veneer of believing they are in the dark that they embrace it. They are convinced that there is no real God and so they set up mockeries against His Church and His faithful children. Some leaders live in, and promote, an idea of darkness that every religious group really is the same with the same goals and so we can just live in promoted ignorance and false understanding hidden behind a world of tolerance. Forgetting we are what we eat, and that diet includes our eyes and ears, many go hungry feeding on falsity and anxious garbage heaped out by various news organizations and social media platforms. These are no different, and actually glorify something we have joked about being bad for a long time—the speed at which gossip and bad news travels, especially compared to good news.

Malachi lived in a time when the spiritual leaders of Judah lived in much impurity. God's people were unfaithful. They forgot His commands. They forget His ways. They forgot Him. Many were swept up by the culture of the day. God's people simply just went with the culture of the day, because it was too hard to do otherwise, and they didn't want to stand out. They wanted to look just like everyone else. They felt as though their Father's ways were outdated, and the children had to grow up. They had to expand and progress and the confession of God, the worship of God, the lives of God's people had to advance into a new century. God had to simply get with the times, and the old ways of things no longer did any good, nor were they relevant.

So, God's Word is spoken through the Prophet Malachi, and he has to Clark Griswold them. They are trying. They are waiting for days that don't seem to come. They seek and search, but they have it all wrong. They miss the basic point of the day, of God, of themselves, and they end up making more of a mess. In the words of a great pastor, "Helping or hurting friends, helping or hurting." Truth be told, they were not helping.

Christmas Vacation is one of those movies that I spend most of Christmas thinking through that same few days from most of the Characters in the movie, and how different each day looks. The events are the same, but each one experiences the day differently. I always seem to read this text and watch this movie in the same week. In fact, watching this movie always gets me thinking of these words from Malachi, ***"On the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts."***³ When the Lord acts, it is the same day. The events will not change, but the experience will be different for the only two kinds of people that exist: believers and unbelievers.

The sun will shine, and all will be brought to the light. Jesus, the very source of God's light, the light that comes into the darkness of humanity, said, ***"Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops."***⁴ ***"For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light."***⁵ As the Light brings all things to light, we really see the Law and Gospel function, purpose, operative reality of God's Word.

Look at this day of the Lord's action. When the light of God comes, the unbelievers are banished and laid waste. As the old English would say, "God will smite them." The Lord causes the old sinful Adam to be destroyed. These are those who are arrogant. Those that are proud of their own works, and boast of their greatness before God. They are self-important and self-made, and the world in fact owes them a favor.

³ Malachi 4:3

⁴ Luke 12:2-3

⁵ Luke 8:17

They are insolent. They are rude, as they seek to serve themselves first. They are presumptuous. What they have belongs to them. Billy Joel summed it up well, “I don't care what you say anymore, this is my life Go ahead with your own life and leave me alone.”⁶

What a terrible day for them, or as Clark would say, “WORSE? How could things get any worse? Take a look around here, Ellen. We're at the threshold.” When everything gets revealed by the light of God's Word, those who held to themselves and looked to themselves, relied on themselves, will be left to themselves. They will be left to their death, and God declares all who do evil will be stubble. They are chaff, nothing but debris that covers the seed and is good for nothing but to be burned. The Lord will burn that debris so hotly, the fire will be so intense, that nothing of the plant will remain.

Now the same day, but a different experience will be had by those who fear God's name. Those who fear God's name are those who revere God alone as the highest being, honor Him with their lives, and avoid what displeases Him. They hold to the words of Genesis, “***I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.***”⁷ They pray, “***Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!***”⁸ And, “***Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods.***”⁹

They boast not in themselves. They boast in the Lord. They are the ones who are poor in spirit, and to them belongs the Kingdom of Heaven. They are the ones who are poor and miserable, who confess they have sinned against God offending God in thought, word, and deed by what they have done and what they have left undone. They have not loved God with their whole heart or their neighbor as themselves. They rightly know they deserve His temporal and eternal punishment, but are heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them. They are those who pray, “*Guilty, now I pour my moaning, All my shame with anguish owning: Spare, O God, Thy suppliant groaning!...Low I kneel with heart-submission, See, like ashes, my contrition; Help me in my last condition!*”¹⁰

⁶ Billy Joel “My Life” 52nd Street, Columbia Records 1978.

⁷ Genesis 17:1

⁸ Psalm 33:8

⁹ Psalm 96:4

¹⁰ Day of Wrath, O Day of Mourning TLH 607: 12, 17

The same sun will come, but they will know healing. As the rays of the sun spread warmth and light over the earth for the growth and maturity of the plants and living creatures, so will the sun of righteousness bring the healing of all hurts and wounds which the power of darkness has inflicted upon the righteous. This is the Word of the Gospel.

On a Silent Night, ***“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”***¹¹ Of this babe we sing, *“Hail, the heav’n-born Prince of Peace! Hail, the Sun of Righteousness! Light and life to all He brings, Ris’n with healing in His wings. Mild He lays His glory by, Born that man no more may die, Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give them second birth.”*¹²

Malachi says to remember the Law of Moses, that is the Torah, the first book in Hebrew, or the first 5 in Greek and English. Remember God’s creation, the Fall of man, and the promise of a Savior. Remember how God continued to work so that not only is man kept and preserved, but the Promised Seed is kept, protected, and cultivated so that, ***“when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”***¹³

In this season of preparation, like Clark, we check every bulb, every aspect, of our lives. We see our sin. We confess our sin. We repent of our sins. Apart from Him and His grace, we are unplugged Christmas lights, dead on the house. Christ, came to earth, goes to the shed, and flips the switch. He turns on the juice and enlightens our dead strands. He causes us to shine bright.

Each day, through the blessings of God’s Holy Word, our baptism indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

¹¹ John 1:14

¹² Hark! the Herald Angels Sing LSB 380:3

¹³ Galatians 4:4–5

With God's grace being ours, even as Satan tries to tempt us away from God to turn into ourselves, we get to say with Clark, "Where do you think you're going? Nobody's leaving. Nobody's walking out on this fun, old-fashioned family Christmas. No, no. We're all in this together. This is a full-blown, four-alarm holiday emergency here. We're gonna press on, and we're gonna have the hap, hap, happiest Christmas since Bing Crosby tap-danced with Danny Kaye."

The emergency of our sin, of our brokenness, of our darkness could only be met with one solution. There is only one answer, "*at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*"¹⁴ He died for you and for me. He was tried at night, but died in the day. His work of salvation was for all to see. It was no secret that this man, born of the Virgin Mary was to die. Sin, Satan and death did its work to try and disrupt His work and snuff out this light. But He through this death took care of His family.

You are given the fruits of His cross, these His gifts (Word and Sacraments). The Son of God is the Sun of Righteousness, and through His grace, like calves you are birthed here in baptism, fed in this barn, this wooden structure, and what else can we do but leave here leaping like calves from the stall! What joy and excitement are ours to be in this light! Your Christmas bonus has come and you have been enrolled in the heavenly courts, which is way better than the jelly of the month club. These gifts are truly the gifts that keep on giving, so that while we must live in perplexity and groaning for a little while, we pray,

*"Faint and weary Thou hast sought me, On the cross of suffering bought me;
Shall such grace be vainly brought me?
From that sinful woman shriven, From the dying thief forgiven,
Thou to me a hope hast given.
To the rest Thou didst prepare me On Thy cross; O Christ, upbear me!
Spare, O God, in mercy spare me!"*¹⁵ Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

¹⁴ Romans 5:6

¹⁵ Day of Wrath, O Day of Mourning TLH 607: 10, 13, 19

Prayer of the Church
Second Sunday in Advent (Populus Zion)
10 December 2023

Lord of hosts, You have given all judgment over to the Son of Man, our incarnate Lord, Jesus Christ. Make us ever mindful of His coming, and keep us steadfast in the Word of Christ, that in accord with Him, we may live in harmony with one another and together glorify You. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, heaven and earth will pass away, but the Word of Your Christ will not. Give to our congregation the strength to endure whatever trials You see fit to send us. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of comfort, send pastors and missionaries to proclaim Your saving Gospel, especially to those who have not heard it, that Your Holy Spirit would cause them to abound in hope. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, preserve the schools of the Church and our baptized children, that our people may constantly be nurtured in the hope of our redemption at Christ's appearing. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Everlasting God, You warn us against preoccupation with the cares of this life while setting tasks before us in which to love You and serve our neighbor. Grant us joy and skill in our various vocations, that we may faithfully serve You with cleansed minds, awaiting the day of our Lord's return. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Almighty God, be near to our nation and its armed forces, and guide all nations of the world, that those entrusted with positions of public service might serve honorably and well for the protection of others. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

You extend Your care and blessing to young and old. We thank and praise You for the gift of life and for the protection and care you have provided as Marrina, Ben, Ethan, Randy, and Sherry celebrate their birthdays, and Marina, Oliver, and Alicia celebrate their baptismal anniversaries. Grant that they may grow in grace, continue to know Your loving-kindness, abide in the confession of Your care and protection, serve You faithfully all the days of their life and finally come to the fullness of Your joys in heaven. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Father, give ear to the cries of Your children. In Your gracious goodness, restore the ill, the lonely, the homebound, the depressed, those near death, those in any need *especially Esther, Marvin, Ruth, Zoey, Betty, Jeri, Denise, Jillian, Marv, Pastor Small, Debbie and those we name in our hearts.* Shine Your face upon all those who call upon You. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God of hope, fill us with all joy and peace in believing. Grant repentance and firm trust to all who commune this day, that receiving Your true body and blood, they may be forgiven and abound in hope, able to stand with a clean conscience before Your judgment throne. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Holy God, Your anger at our sin is just, and yet Your mercy abounds to us for redemption. Grant us repentant hearts, that we would not continue in sin or wander away from the faith, but rather recognize our sin, turn from it and receive Your forgiveness. Grant us a clear conscience for Christ's sake, that we may live joyfully and without fear; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**