

Last Sunday of the Church Year

November 20, 2022

Malachi 3:13-18:

“What Was, Is, but for How Much Longer?”

- I. When Everybody's Doing It.
- II. The Remnant.
- III. But for How Much Longer?

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 N. Oakland Avenue
Decatur Illinois 62526

Dear Friends in Christ,

As you noted, this is "The Last Sunday of the Church Year." And I wonder if these words of Habakkuk's complaint resonate with us?

"O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted (Hab.1:2-4)."

And God answered Habakkuk: "Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if I told you (Hab.1:5)." The work He did was the Babylonian captivity of Judah, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C. God punished the gross idolatry, corruption and violence of His Old Testament church.

Jump centuries forward to the time of Jesus' First Coming, and hear His ultimate answer to Habakkuk's complaint: "And because lawlessness will be increased the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Mt.25:12-14)." You see . . .

WHAT WAS, IS, BUT FOR HOW MUCH LONGER?

I. When Everybody's Doing It.

Our text was written 400 plus years before Christ walked the earth. God is speaking to His church through Malachi. He's speaking a little over 70 years after the Babylonian captivity and the Jews were allowed to return to and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple under the protection of the Persian king Cyrus. The Lord said:

"Your words have been hard against me, says the Lord. But you say, 'How have we spoken against you?' You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts? And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test (vv.13-15)."

You see? It was the same old song and dance. And here we are, in another time and most of the church has picked up and embraced much of the ways and thinking of the world. Or as a Lutheran pastor once said to me, in the presence of a half a dozen other pastors, "We've got to become more like the world in order to win the world." Brothers and sisters, I do wonder what the number is of those who sit in churches and truly believe Scripture: "Your word (nothing else) is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Ps.119:105)." I wonder what the number is of those who truly believe Jesus' words: "No one comes to the Father except through me (Jn.14:6)."?

Do you see? It was humanity's fallen ways and thinking that brought the world to its knees at the time of the great Flood - its ways and thinking that were embraced by the church at the time of the Babylonian captivity - its ways and thinking that were embraced by the church at the time of the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. - its ways and thinking that will bring about the fulfillment of Jesus' words, "For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man (Mt.24:37)." And behind it all is that most savage piece of hell's theology, Satan's murderous lie: "Everybody's doing it. 'You will not surely die (Gn. 3:4).'" Or, as the corrupted church in our text declared, "What is the profit of keeping (God's) charge (His Word) or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts?" They were saying, "God isn't fair! It's not the positive we want! What good is it to live in a state of repentance and trust? Nobody else does!" But that wasn't true.

II. The Remnant.

Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name.

This was the Remnant of God's people that firmly stood for the Word of God. It's the Remnant that entered the Ark at the time of the flood - 8 people! It's the Remnant that will be on earth at Christ's return. A remnant is defined as "a small quantity of something." It will be those "who feared the Lord and esteemed his name (Malachi 3:16b)." Paul writes:

Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, now he appeals to God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." But what is God's reply to him?" "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace (as will be the fact to the end) (Rom. 11:2-5).

Concerning the coming end of this world, Jesus said to the church, "...you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away...(Mt.24:9b-10a)." Regarding His return Jesus said, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth (Lk.18:8b)." This points to a remnant.

And consider this: In light of the very long life span of the pre-flood population I recall hearing that the population of earth could have been 2-3 million people. Answers in Genesis states, "Others believe that Earth's population was much higher. If the growth rate in the pre-Flood world was equal to the growth rate in 2000...there could have been about 750 million people at the time of the Flood. However, given the extremely long life span prior to the Flood, the growth rate could have been much higher." The point is, since the church consisted of only 8 people at the time of the flood - a world packed with violence and corruption - how large will the church be at the last moment? The issue of the church isn't growth just for the sake of numbers. The issue for the church is to proclaim the love of God in Christ and to remain faithful. Seriously, *what was, is.*

Again, our text reports, "Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed His name." It's a book of remembrance, comparable to The Book of Life. It's a book containing the names of those who hold to the Blood of the Lamb who takes away our sins. The issue for the church is not to change with the times. God's Word never changes. The issue for the church is to proclaim the Gospel and stand faithful to the end! And so, the final words . . .

III. But for How Much Longer?

They shall be mine says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him (vv.17-18).

The words, "when I make up my treasured possession" take us to the words of Jesus:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world (Mt.25:31-34)."

So, the theme is, **“What was, is, but for how much longer?”** The question can only be answered this way: Jesus said, “For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man (Mt.24:37).” Again, the days of Noah were filled with a corruption and violence of which we have no record. However, considering the corruption and violence of the present we’re getting a clear picture of the past. The question is, “How much worse will things get?” But, as Jesus said:

“Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect (Mt.24).”

How much longer? We need not know, but this we must know: God has given us the greatest miracle: forgiveness of sin and everlasting life through faith in Christ! We know, through Scripture, what this world is and where it’s headed. We know that He has given every one of us the reason we are on this earth at this time and this place; namely, to proclaim the love of God in Christ to others. What was, is. God help us to be the light and salt He called us to be for the time we have been given!

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott