

Dreaming of a White Christmas?

Malachi 3:1-5; Mark 1:1-8

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • November 26, 2017 • Second Service

Beloved Congregation of Christ: Imagine listening to Christmas music from September to January. Imagine singing “Winter Wonderland” in 80-degree heat. It will be fitting then to sing, “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas.” But if you were in the Philippines, these would not be imagining, but real. As early as November, children go caroling for money singing, “O what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh.”

In many parts of California, just dreaming of a white Christmas is also real. Most Californians have to drive to the mountains to see snow. And what do you do to prepare for Christmas? Buy presents for everyone on Black Friday and wrap them? Make a list of family and friends to invite, then plan for Christmas Eve dinner? These are wonderful preparations.

But what about preparing for celebration of the coming of Christ into the world to save sinners? Our text today in Malachi 3:1-5 is one such preparation. And in studying this passage and taking it to heart, a white Christmas turns from a dream into a reality.

Today, our short meditation on this text will be in three parts:

1. The “Messenger” Will Prepare You for a “White Christmas”
2. The “Messenger of the Covenant” Will Come to Fulfill Your Dream of a White Christmas
3. The “Messenger of the Covenant” Will Come Again to Make Everything “White as Snow”

The “Messenger” Will Prepare You for a “White Christmas”

The setting of the prophecy of Malachi is a bleak one. The temple had been rebuilt, but the glory-cloud of God is not seen there, unlike the days before the Babylonian exile. So their offerings and sacrifices did not mean much to them. Even worse, they were under the domination of foreign powers, first by the Babylonians, then by the Medo-Persians. Their motivation for true worship was lost. The offerings dwindled, the temple was neglected, and it was rundown.

So they waited for the coming king, the Messiah. Years passed and no Messiah. Because they saw their pagan neighbors prosper, they asked, “*Where is the God of justice?*” Would he still fulfill his promised coming Messiah? But if the people were weary of waiting for the Messiah, so too was God “wearied” by their grumbling (Mal 2:17). God answers in Chapter 3, beginning with verse 1, “*Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.*”

Who is this “messenger”? In the Bible, the word for “messenger” is often also translated as “angel.” Angels carry God’s Word to people, in addition to their duties of glorifying God and ministering to God’s people.

But the “messenger” in verse 1 is not an angel. We know this from the New Testament’s use of this verse and other verses. In Mark 1:2–3, we read, *“As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”* Mark really uses two prophecies here: Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. Then in verse 4, Mark reveals who this messenger was, *“John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*

John the Baptizer as the messenger of the Lord proclaimed a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. The sign he used is baptism with water. Old Testament baptism was a ceremonial purification for sins. So we read in Mark 1:5 that the people being baptized were *“confessing their sins.”* Why did they need to be cleansed with water? Not that their bodies were filthy, but their hearts were filthy. God called their hearts “uncircumcised” because they have become as wicked as their uncircumcised pagan neighbors (Jer 9:26). So his message to Israel was, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Matt 3:2).

The “Messenger of the Covenant” Will Come to Fulfill Your Dream of a White Christmas

God will send his “messenger” to “prepare the way” before him. Then God continues, *“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.”* Notice the capitalized “LORD” whom the people have been seeking for many years. The one who will suddenly come to his temple is Yahweh, God himself. Was Malachi talking about the temple in Jerusalem? We will find out later that he was not speaking of the Jerusalem temple.

This capitalized “LORD” is also called *“the messenger of the covenant.”* If this “the messenger of the covenant” is Yahweh himself, then he could not be the first human “messenger” mentioned who would “prepare the way” of Yahweh. He is a different messenger.

And why is he called “the messenger of the covenant”? Because we read Jeremiah 31:31-34 that Yahweh will make a “new covenant” with his people,

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . . For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people . . . For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

This covenant is the new covenant of grace that Yahweh will make with his people when he himself will make provision for the complete forgiveness of their sins. And this forgiveness will only come through the “messenger of the covenant.”

Who then is this “messenger of the covenant”? We have the answer in the words of the “messenger,” John the Baptizer, *“After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”* (Mark 1:7-8). Later, John revealed to the people who this “messenger of the covenant” is, when he saw Jesus coming to him to be baptized:

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, “After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.” I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel” (John 1:29–31).

Jesus is the “messenger of the covenant.” He made a covenant with his Father to willingly come down from heaven, and assume human flesh and blood by being born on that first Christmas night to *“save his people from their sins”* (Matt 1:21).

So Malachi 3:3-4 says of Christ,

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. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

When Jesus comes, he will “purify the sons of Levi.” In the days of Malachi, the Levitical priests were corrupt, so their offerings were not pleasing to the LORD. But when Jesus comes, he will purify these “priests.” Who are these “priests” in the new covenant? This the church of Christ, *“a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession”* (1 Pet 2:9). We do not offer bloody animal sacrifices, but we offer our lives as living, holy sacrifices that are acceptable to God. We offer prayers and songs that are pleasing to God in worship.

Why then the reference to “white Christmas”? In Isaiah 1:18, God pleads to rebellious Israel, *“Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”* God condemned Israel when they sinned against their own people, saying, *“your hands are full of blood”* (Isa 1:15).

The LORD promised to send Jesus, his “messenger of the covenant,” to die on the cross for the sins of his people. This is the only way that God will purify us from our sins. Even the vilest, most offensive sins – red as blood – of his people will be forgiven by God, and make them so perfectly pure, white as snow. This is why David pleads to God after his bloody sins of adultery and murder, *“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow”* (Psa 51:7). On that first Christmas night, Jesus was born as “the messenger of the covenant” to turn our bloody sins into the purest white of righteousness.

The “Messenger of the Covenant” Will Come Again to Make Everything “White as Snow”

The coming of Christ, the “messenger of the covenant,” is two-fold. In his first coming, he was born in a lowly manger, suffered all his life all the way to his cruel death on the cross. These he did for the forgiveness of our sins. But in his second coming, he will return as the victorious King, exacting vengeance on all his enemies.

When he first came, he started purifying his people with fire and soap. The refiner’s fire separates the impurities from silver and gold. Soap also removes and cleans dirt from our bodies and our clothes. But the purifying and cleansing is not yet complete. We still sin daily. Our doctrine, worship and life are not perfect. We still need to be completely purified.

When Christ returns, he will complete this purification. No impurities or dirt will remain in us. We will be completely separated from sin and sinners. He will completely separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be cleansed so that their sins would become white as snow. But the goats will be destroyed by eternal fire, so Malachi says that they will not endure his coming.

Most people today can’t wait for Christmas to come. They see it as a “delight,” just as the Jews in Malachi’s day delighted in the promised coming of the Messiah. But those who do not believe in Jesus Christ, the “messenger of the covenant,” should be terrified at Christmas. They should not be dreaming of a “white” Christmas. Because when Jesus returns, he will find them as vile as blood, and not white as snow. They will not be able to stand and endure his coming.

But you who are truly God’s people who believe and trust in Christ as your Savior from sin, don’t just dream of a “white Christmas.” You already have it! Because your vilest sins have been washed by the blood of Christ. And when he returns, you do not have to be corrupted and stained with the bloody, vile sins of the world. For God and Christ will declare to you on that coming second Christmas, *“You have washed your robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”* (Rev 7:14). Instead of seeing your bloody sins, God will see you as white as snow because Christ has cleansed and purified all your sins with his own precious blood.