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Pentecost 23

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Dawning of a New Day”

Text: Malachi 4:1-6 (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-28)

(I wrote a version of this sermon for Concordia Pulpit Resources for this year. This is my edited and expanded version of that sermon.)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The sun came up this morning. Okay - I can tell you're not impressed, or surprised! The sun comes up every morning, right? Whether you like it or not.

And honestly, there are some mornings we like it and some mornings we don't. There is the first day of vacation and there is the first day of school. There is Christmas morning and there is the morning of your dentist appointment. There is the morning of the day you are getting married, and there is the morning of the day you are going to bid farewell to a loved one in a cemetery beside a six foot deep hole. The sun comes up, whether you want it to or not.

And whether you're ready for it or not. Whether your homework for school or your presentation for work is done or not - the sun's coming up. Whether you're ready for the exam or not - the sun's coming up. Whether you're ready to preach or not. The sun comes up and a new day dawns . . . ready or not.

But this is not a lecture about nature. Thus spake the prophet *Malachi*.

For so he told the people of Israel (and as we heard in the Old Testament reading today): the sun is going to rise. ***The sun of righteousness***. And some will want it to, and some will not. Some will be ready, and some will not. For some it will be a day of joy, but for others it will be a day of dread. For ***the arrogant and the evildoers, the sun of righteousness shall arise*** and they shall be ***set ablaze***, Malachi says. But ***for those who fear the name of the Lord, the sun of righteousness will arise with healing in His wings***, and they ***shall go out leaping like calves from the stall***. Leaping at the joy of this new day.

The new day that dawns when Jesus comes. **First**, when He comes as the sun of righteousness who arose from heaven and came down to be our Saviour. God incarnate. God enfleshed. To die for us - for the healing forgiveness of our sins. And then **second**,

when He comes as the sun of righteousness who could not be swallowed up by the darkness of death. When He rose *again* . . . from that death. With healing. With life. For a new day. A resurrection day. When the darkness was scattered and the light won. When death was overcome and Life won.

But there's one more time - a **third** time - the sun of righteousness is going to rise, on the Last Day, when the light of His glory will shine on every person, living and dead. When those who have died will rise to life again. And some will like it and some will not. Some will be ready and some will not. For some it will be a day of dread and for some it will be a day of joy and eternal life.

But which of those three sun rises is Malachi talking about? telling us about today, as we heard? Well, living 400 or so years before Jesus was born, of course he is speaking of when the Son of God arose to be born a man. **But He became man to die, and He died to rise, and He ascended to return.** To speak of one of those sun rises is to speak of all of them. They're connected. In fact, they're *really* all one big work of God for you. And so Malachi writes about this sun rise, this Son rising, because he wants you to be ready. And joyful. To not dread that day when it comes for you, but look forward to it in faith.

The people in Malachi's day, though you see, were not ready. They why they needed him to preach to them. *But they should have been ready.* It had not been that long since the nation had been defeated by the Babylonians and taken away as prisoners of war, exiled from their homes. The Babylonians had come in and leveled the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. It wasn't even a contest, a real war. It was a rout. Completely one-sided. Utter and complete destruction. God's discipline for their sin. God had sent other prophets to tell them that.

And then after 70 years living in exile in a foreign land, the people returned. Just as God had also promised. And when they returned, they rebuilt the city, the walls, the Temple, their homes, their businesses . . . but it wasn't the same. It wasn't as strong. It wasn't as glorious. It was a constant reminder of what happens when you turn away from God.

Yet turn away again they did! They got things up and running, but all was not well. Short memories, stubborn hearts, and the allure of sin were winning. The people doubted God's love. They were despising His name. And so in their sacrifices, they weren't offering to God animals worthy of Him, but ones they didn't want - those that were blemished and lame and blind. They weren't paying their tithes but keeping for themselves. And maybe worst of all, with all this going on, they were accusing God of not being fair and doing wrong!

So God, as He had so often in the past, sent them a prophet to preach to them. The truth. He sent Malachi to call them to repentance. To repent of what they were doing. To repent of what they thought of Him. And to remember. To **remember the law of Moses, the**

statutes and rules that God commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Remember . . . or instead of that morning being one of leaping like calves in joy, they will be reduced to weeping piles of stubble and set ablaze.

But *remembering the law of Moses* didn't just mean remembering the Ten Commandments, straightening up, and being good. It meant much more than that, because God gave Moses much more than that at Horeb, or as you better know that place as, Mt. Sinai. For after giving Moses the Commandments on the top of that mountain, God then also gave Moses the instructions for the Tabernacle - the mobile Temple - the place where God would dwell with His people for the forgiveness of their sins.

And so the Tabernacle was the place (to use words from Luke that we heard today) where God's people would *straighten up, raise their heads*, and look for the day their Saviour would rise up. The Commandments would show them their sin and call them to repentance, and the Tabernacle would show them their Saviour and give them forgiveness. That they wait with eager hearts for His morning. For His new day. For His coming.

So thus spake Malachi. But Malachi isn't preaching to the people back then today - **He's preaching to you**. So how are you? How is it with you? Are you eager for Jesus to come again? For the Last Day? Are you ready for that day? . . . Maybe yes, maybe no. Maybe *sometimes*.

It's hard, isn't it? There's so much to do and so little time. We're busier than ever and work more and harder than ever. Our lives are complicated and money is short. There may even be times when you doubt God's love because of what is going on in your life and how things in this world perhaps seem so unfair and unjust. Like the people of Malachi's day, maybe your memory of all that God has done for you in the past is short, your heart stubborn, and the allure of sin strong. So God gets the short stick in your busy life, you prioritize other things before Him, keep more for yourself and give less to Him - you know, just whatever's left . . . So maybe you're hitting the snooze button on your spiritual alarm clock. 5 more minutes . . . one more thing . . . a little more enjoyment of this . . . and so you really don't want that sun to rise. You know which one. Not yet. Because you're not ready. Because you know you're not who you should be.

And like the people of Malachi's day, we should know better, should we? Don't we? The evidence of our need, of our sin, well . . . we see it in our lives, and it's all around us. We see signs of it like Luke talked about. And when the when the sun of righteousness arises, when Jesus comes back again, maybe you don't know what He'll think of you . . .

Well God does not want you to doubt, be unprepared for that day, or fear that day. So ever merciful, he promises us a rooster, so to speak, who will herald the rising of the sun of righteousness now. That we repent and not only be ready, but joyful at His coming.

Malachi calls him Elijah. John the Baptist is the name he goes by in the New Testament. He will proclaim repentance, but even more than that he will point to Jesus and crow at the Son: *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. His way of saying: Behold *the sun of righteousness with healing in His wings*. Healing for you. For you, sick and sluggish with sin, weighed down by life, and in need of forgiveness and joy.

And the thing about roosters: **roosters don't have snooze buttons!** They just crow. Unless you cut their heads off. That happened to John. But as Herod found out, you can't stop John from crowing that easily. His words continued to crow in Herod's heart and mind, and his words continue to crow for us. To crow the dawning of salvation for us. From the Jordan to the Font to the Absolution to the Altar, the Son is rising to scatter the darkness of our hearts. The Lamb of God is taking away *your* sin. That's why we sing John's words right before coming to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus every week: here is Jesus' healing touch for you. And this healing, this forgiveness, proclaimed to you, washed over you, and placed into your mouths in His Supper, answers the question: *When the sun of righteousness arises, when Jesus comes back again, what will He think of me?* It will be the same as He thinks of you now as He rises upon you now: you are forgiven. You are Mine.

And so because of Jesus, that day really will be the dawning of a new day for you. A great and awesome day of joy. And His coming to us now, here, preparing us for that day.

And so in just a few weeks - five, actually - we'll sing of this sun of righteousness with great joy as we rejoice in His coming in the flesh. For we'll sing these words of Malachi in a well-known carol:

*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* (LSB #380 v. 3).

And as He is risen, so are you, already now. With His forgiveness, each day, a new day in Him. With His forgiveness, each day dying to sin and rising in Him to live a new life. A day to serve others, and as Paul said today, *never growing weary of doing good*. Never growing weary, for you have His strength, His love, His life.

After Malachi preached it was another 400 years or so until the sun of righteousness arose and the rooster named John crowed. How long will it be for you? How long will it be until Jesus comes again? When that Son rises in glory? We don't know and Jesus isn't telling.

But until that day comes for you, you can live in the confidence of His forgiveness and in joy, knowing that *whenever* that day comes, with repentance and faith, with His forgiveness and life, you are ready. And it will be a morning unlike any other. And just as

John leaped for joy when the still *in utero* Jesus came to visit him, so you too will leap for joy when Jesus comes for you, and you will leap with John in the day that has no end. The day of heaven. The eternal day. When the sun of righteousness will shine, never to set again.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.