

## Return to the Lord

**St. Mark Lutheran**  
**Three services**

**Pastor Ken Welsh**  
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*"For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts". Malachi 3:6-7*

As I make visits to people in our congregation, I am reminded of how many people have serious problems. There are those who are confined to their homes or nursing care. There are some without a job. There are others who do not have enough money and may have to move. Probably all of us here have problems of some sort, whether they are big or whether they are small.

But I wonder if we ever stop to think that God himself has serious problems. It is well for us to look at things sometimes from God's viewpoint. He has at least two serious problems. He has the problem of sin and death which mankind has brought into the world. He has a long range plan for dealing with that through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ to atone for our sins. But then he has a second serious problem. He has revealed his plan of salvation; he is drawing to himself people who can be saved and be with him for eternity; however, these people keep falling back into disobedience and sinful ways. Let's face it: God's problems are also our problems.

Our lesson this morning is mainly based on words from God's prophet Malachi. The name "Malachi", means "my messenger". He is probably the last prophet of God until John the Baptist appeared about four hundred years later. Malachi predicted the function of John as a messenger of God to prepare the way for the imminent coming of Jesus Christ.

Now a little background should help us understand the situation. God had permitted most of his people to be taken into exile because of their rampant disobedience. They came back from exile and finished rebuilding the temple around 516 B.C. The King of Persia, Artaxerxes, even encouraged the Jews to develop temple worship and to make sure the law of Moses was being obeyed. How about that?

Then thirteen years later, the same Persian king permitted his cupbearer Nehemiah to come back to Jerusalem to build walls and repair walls to protect the people. You may remember a past message called "Build the Wall" when we spoke about that. But Nehemiah found that things were not as they should be. Reforms were needed to help the poor, many Jews had become involved in mixed marriages with non believers, many were not paying attention to the Sabbath and giving their offerings, and the priests had become corrupt in what they were teaching. Nehemiah seemed to have success in straightening things out and he returned to the service of the Persian king twelve years later. I have little doubt that living with a Persian king had advantages that could not be found in Jerusalem.

Later, he came back to Jerusalem, and he found that the people were being disobedient and had fallen back into their same old ways. Just like most sinful people, they searched for an excuse for their sinful actions. Their excuses were that God had not yet come to his temple as he had promised. The glorious kingdom promised had not yet been realized. Malachi, believed to be a contemporary of Nehemiah, rebuked the Jewish people for their repeated sins and gave them a warning. God would indeed return and he would judge the people for their sins. He told them that only through repentance and reformation will they come to experience God's blessing.

But here is something astounding, and it is something we dare not miss. God continued to care for them. God continued to seek them. God did not want to give up on them. Speaking through his prophet Malachi, he told them, "For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts."

We can learn from this account given by Malachi that God's words have implications for us today. Particularly during this season of Advent, when we remember the birth of Jesus Christ and look forward to his Second Coming, we should examine our own lives in the light of God's word. Then we will be better prepared for that day when we meet the Lord.

Let's look especially at the words, "For I the Lord do not change..." Sometimes this is hard for us to grasp. We live in a changing world. Our friends, finances, and even our features change. Fashions change. Jobs change. One source I read said the average number of jobs an American worker has held by age 40 is eight.

If you have gone to a class reunion I am sure you have noticed how much everyone one has changed. The hair gets thinner. The midsection gets fuller. The memory loses it sharpness. That's not all. Our moods change. People have their good days and their bad days. At times we hear that someone is "not quite himself". But God never has a bad day. God does not change. This characteristic of God is called his immutability.

James describes God as one "with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." (James 1:17) God does not change for the better because he is perfect, and being perfect, he does not change for the worse. He is perfect. This should bring comfort and reassurance to us. God can be relied upon. He is stable; he is steadfast and sure, and he will abide by his word.

What that means is that God's evaluation of the human heart is the same in every generation. His offer of salvation in Christ is a constant. The work of God's Spirit on human hearts continues from generation to generation. The certainty of life beyond the grave is unaffected by what society thinks and teaches. Biblical truth remains the truth in spite of public opinion polls.

What does this mean to us? God will always care, as long as we are still alive on this earth. God will always seek a relationship with People. God will always forgive the one who truly repents. He will save the person who trusts in Jesus for his salvation. Since God is unchanging, his promises are sure.

What it does not mean is that we can ignore God's Law and make up our own rules. It has been said that the Ten Commandments are not the "Ten Suggestions". We need to take his laws seriously. When we don't, there will usually be consequences. In extreme circumstances, the Bible seems to indicate that prolonged and non-confessed sin can harm our faith. But in these situations it is not God who has changed; it is we.

But the primary aspect of God's nature is his desire to save. He has set up a way by which we can deal with our sinful mistakes and restore a close relationship with a holy and perfect God. We are to confess our sins to him and seek his help in turning away from our sinful ways. We are to take the way we live our lives seriously.

This season of Advent would be a good time for to take a honest look at ourselves. It would be well for us to look in the mirror of God's Law, and discover or rediscover what our main weaknesses are. A review of the Ten Commandments and their meanings from Luther's Small Catechism would be just the thing that could help us in our self-examination. (pg. 56) The next step would be to confess anything in our lives that is wrong, and ask for God's help in turning away from our faults. If you study one commandment a day it would take you up to just before Christmas. I plan to do that. Will anyone join me?

Our glance into the history of Israel today should have provided us with a warning and a promise. God will judge the wicked. God will often stand aside and let us suffer the consequences of what we have done. But if we have drifted away from a close relationship with the Lord because of our sinful behavior, remember his promise which has been preserved for us: "Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts." Amen.