

Four hundred years of that is where we find ourselves today. A voice that you expect to hear has gone quiet. Divine silence.

The Prophetic Book of Malachi was written to a people who had just been allowed to leave Exile and return to their homeland. Overall, the Book of Malachi serves as a call to repentance from God, urging the people of Israel to return to faithful obedience to His covenant. It emphasizes the importance of genuine worship, ethical conduct, and social justice. And it ends with a promise of HOPE.

I want to begin in the last book and chapter of the Old Testament this morning; let's open to Malachi chapter 4.

But before, let's PRAY

Malachi 4

1 "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire," says the Lord Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. 2 But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. 3 Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act," says the Lord Almighty. 4 "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. 5 "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

This chapter is good news for these people. It is filled with some incredible promises.

Promises from Malachi 4

The Wicked will be Judged (4:1)

The Righteous will find healing & prosperity (4:2)

Righteous will have authority over the wicked (4:3)

Elijah will come to prepare you for the Lord's return (4:5-6)

For a people who had just come out of 70 years of exile and oppression and were still living under Persian authority and not entirely free - this was incredibly HOPE news...

But between these two pages was 400 years. Several political regimes would overthrow one another and take power... things would seem better for a while, then bad again...it was a cycle that would continue for generations. Eventually, the Romans would take over.

During this time, for the most part, they could continue to practice their religious customs... but this HOPEFUL promise from the book of Malachi indeed grew dim.

Taking us back to this reality is what the practice of ADVENT is about...

Because for most of us, if we are honest, the familiarity of Christmas can rob us of the miracle and the wonder... the desperate and nearly hopeless state of the world when this baby would come crashing in and rewrite History. Not just on a cosmic or political level but on an individual level. The birth, life, death, and resurrection of this Baby would change my life forever... and your life forever.

The rush and busyness of the holiday season may prevent individuals from taking the time... and MAKING ROOM for personal reflection on the profound implications of the Christmas story.

ADVENT: expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas - The word "Advent" is derived from the Latin word "adventus," meaning "coming" or "arrival."

And with these 400 years of divine silence and the hope meter running low, I want us to turn the page, or actually a couple of pages, to the Gospel of Luke and the first chapter and pick up in verse 5

Luke 1:5-7

5In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

So we have the timetable - Herod is the King, and it's 1st century, some 400 years after Malachi is written.

There is a priest named Zechariah (which means God remembers) who is a priest. His wife Elizabeth (which means God is my Oath) are both descendants of Aaron - who was the brother and predecessor to a well-known figure named Moses, who would lead God's people out of slavery, and to the promised land.

6Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth are righteous before God... still all these years later, obeying the laws of God that they were taught to obey.

Despite this 400 years of divine silence and what had to be centuries of disappointment, they were holding onto HOPE... This was not simply optimism in the odds because they were stacked against them.

But they knew their family history and that their God delivered on His promises.

Their HOPE was not in a probability but a promise—a promise, making and promise, keeping God.

7But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

But to make matters more grim for this couple, they couldn't have a baby.

Which is a pretty big problem in this culture for a few reasons. One reason is that their family would end with them; this was a big deal in this culture. Much of their significance was in raising the next generation... man held out HOPE that even if they would not see God's promise, that their future generations would.

And on top of that, when a woman could not have a baby in this culture, it made people think that she was a disgrace. Most outsiders assumed there was some divine reason for this and that God may have disapproved of them.

The talk at the well about the priest and his barren wife would have been a big deal.

8Once, when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

So it happened to be Zechariah's division's duty to serve in the temple this day. He was chosen at random to be the one to go into the temple that day and burn incense while the people outside prayed and worshiped God. The burning of this incense in the temple was symbolic of the prayers and worship of God's people, creating an aroma and ascending toward heaven.

11Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. 14He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

Now, an angel shows up, and Zechariah is afraid... the angel senses this and tells him not to be frightened.

And then the Angel just lays the entire birth plan on him at one time... This is a lot of information. It is the pregnancy news, the gender reveal, the naming, the upbringing, and the career. All at one time.

17And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Wait... where did we hear those words before?

Oh yeah... 400 years ago in Malachi 4:5-6 (5“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents, or else I will come and strike the land with destruction.”)

This story shows beautifully that the New Testament is birthed from the faithful soil of the Old Testament.

18Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

19The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.

Interestingly enough, Zechariah’s prayer that day in the Temple would have likely begun something like - “Our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...” he would have probably said this thousands of times... if you remember the story of Abraham and his wife Sarah. Another old couple that was barren and well beyond child-barring years...

This prayer was an acknowledgment that he is praying to a promise, making and keeping God.

20And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

21Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 22When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

Zechariah comes out of the temple... people are wondering what’s going on & all he can do is play charades... and try to explain his wife is having a baby.

23When his time of service was completed, he returned home. 24After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.

25“The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

What a statement from Elizabeth here... God has shown her favor and removed the disgrace she felt among the people. After all of these years... all of the tears... God sees her faithfulness and responds.

As we continue on to read Luke 1, we will discover another Angel shows up, but this time to an unwed young girl named Mary, and tells her that she is going to have a son whose name would be Jesus.

This is pretty shocking news for a young girl... but the angel says, by the way - your older cousin Elizabeth is going to have a miracle baby too! In God's providence, both of these women are in the same family, which I would guess was a sort of protective measure for both of them.

39At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

So once Mary hears her cousin Elizabeth, who is six months further along, also happens to be having a miracle baby, she heads to Elizabeth's house to tell her the news and to likely get some advice, and share these wild pregnancy stories.

And the second she heard Mary's voice, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit; her baby leaps in her belly and she knows Mary is carrying the Messiah!

As we follow Luke Chapter 1, we see that Elizabeth finally has this baby.. People are excited to hear the name announcement of their son who would be named after his dad like most first, and Elizabeth says they are going to call him John... to which everyone is shocked and a bit disappointed by (some of you have been there when sharing your baby's name too)

They are like Zechariah, say it ain't so!

Zechariah, who still cannot talk at this point, writes down, "His name is John"

Zechariah - God/YHWH remembers, and Elizabeth- God is my oath, give birth to John- God is gracious...

And in that moment, Zechariah can speak again.

Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and writes a song about this son, named John, who would be this Elijah-type figure that was promised and restore HOPE that this promised Messiah and delivered would indeed arrive.

400 years after this promise of HOPE for the people of Israel, this Elijah-type character would show up... his life was all about preparing the people to receive the HOPE of the world, but one of the key things I think John, the cousin of Jesus we more often know as John the Baptist, would do is help reveal all of their misplaced HOPES. Which would properly prepare their hearts to MAKE ROOM for Jesus. Redirecting their HOPES in the right direction. Which we will continue to hear about in the coming weeks

John Revealed Misplaced Hopes

Misplaced Hope in Religious Ritual - While many people had placed their HOPE in religious rituals and external practices, John preached that it was a heart of repentance and turning away from sin that would lead to freedom.

Misplaced Hope in Lineage - While many people had placed their HOPE in their family heritage, John emphasized that every person will be held accountable for their own repentance and the fruit in their life.

Misplaced Hope in Power - While many people had placed their HOPE in gaining more power and making a name for themselves, John was humble and was not interested in gaining a crowd for himself, but always pointed toward Jesus as the source of HOPE.

Misplaced Hope in Politics - While many people had placed their HOPE in political or military power. John redirected their hopes by emphasizing that the true deliverer was not a military or political leader but the long-awaited Messiah, who would establish a Spiritual Kingdom and not an earthly Kingdom.

And I think if we are honest for a moment, we have some of the same misplaced hope -

Hope that if I can just do enough good work or religious duties, give enough money, and pray enough times, then I will be able to measure up.

Hope that because of your parent's faith and faithfulness you will be able to get an all-access pass into the Kingdom. Jesus would say it's not about being born, but it's about being reborn that will get you into the KINGDOM of heaven.

HOPE that if you gain enough power and influence. That if you get the right job or the right title... that if you accumulate enough wealth, or land... or followers... then you will find satisfaction.

HOPE that if the right person or party or the right amount of partisanship. John was preparing these people to make room for a HOPE that is not of this world.

Hope is not found in a politician.

Hope is not found any place on a map.

Hope is not found in possessions.

Hope is not found in a prestigious title.

Hope is not found in prosperity

Hope is not found in philanthropy

Hope is not found in your potential.

Hope is not found in possibilities or probabilities

Hope IS A PERSON, and His name is JESUS.

And He is the HOPE of the World!

And just Like John was sent to redirect thier hope, Advent is a Season to remember the reason for our HOPE...

Because far to often we hitch our HOPE to that which is FINITE instead of INFINITE...our eyes are fixed on the EXTERNAL circumstances instead of the ETERNAL promises we have been given.

Jesus' battle wasn't with kings and politics... He didn't come to be a rival for Herod or overthrow a government, no matter how much people wanted him to.... And I don't think much has changed... Jesus isn't as interested in politics now as you think He is...

Jesus had His eyes on a different throne... a more eternal and intimate throne...

Jesus was interested in sitting on the throne of the hearts of men and women... And his mission is to overthrow whatever is sitting on His throne.

Yet the irony of the season that we celebrate the birth of a King is that we can easily spend most of our time letting lesser kings sit on that throne. Buying into the HYPE wrapped to look like HOPE.

Too often in our world, the term HOPE has been hijacked for HYPE... and at the end of the day it is based on some feelings of empty optimism... but the HOPE of eternity is more grand than any HYPED up version of the future that your finite mind can conjure up.

For many of us we love this season, because the hype distracts us from the lack of hope. In your marriage, in your financial situation, in your diagnosis, in your pain.

For others all this season reminds you about is pain, suffering and loss, and you reject all the HYPE just makes you angry and you refuse to hope.

But here is the truth about hope... true hope is rooted in the reality of our brokenness

I love the way Charles Spurgeon once said it...

"Hope itself is like a star- not to be seen in the sunshine of prosperity, and only to be discovered in the night of adversity."- Charles Spurgeon

Maybe you are in a moment of hopelessness and desperation... the Gospel provides good news for you!

As you read Scripture, you will find over and over that the HOPE provided by the Gospel of Jesus proclaimed was only good news for the blind, the lame, the lepers, the outcasts, and the poor... and those who were well aware of their brokenness and need for HOPE... but it was the self-proclaimed righteous and rich who often missed it. The names on the "nice" list

And yet for Zechariah and Elizabeth... and God's promised people who were living in what was one of the darkest and most desperate moments in their history, that God would begin to enact His plan to prepare the world to be able to receive this great promised HOPE...

Hope turns our face toward eternity to give us the strength we need to face the present.

This is why we must be aware of where we stare. Because it becomes too easy for us to stare at our situation instead of our Savior, the more time you spend looking at your situation instead of your Savior, the more hopeless you will become. The inverse is also true. The more time you spend looking at your Savior, the more filled with HOPE you will become.

Because you remember that HOPE is not rooted in probabilities and possibilities; it is anchored in a promise. A Promise maker and promise keeper

One of the greatest indicators that Jesus lives inside of you is that you are filled with Hope.

Some of the most incredible, faithful people I know are living through some of the most painful present realities... as they face improbable and even impossible odds... they are not crushed.

A hope that stretches into eternity cannot be crushed by present realities.

Because Hope is a person and His name is Jesus... the resurrected womb of Elizabeth was all about preparing people for the resurrected tomb of Jesus...

Ultimately, this baby who would be named Jesus, the Messiah that was the promised HOPE of these people, would be crushed, killed and placed in a tomb... again leaving things to look

hopeless, and yet three days later this Jesus would rise from the dead as our ETERNAL HOPE...

Conquering death and making us a promise that He would one day return... and right every single wrong... wipe every single tear... erase every pain... and eradicate evil once and for all... and then he promises that those who have place their HOPE in Him will reign with Him forever and ever... and that is a promise we bank on, despite the difficulties and disappointments we are facing.

So, church, this Advent season, would we refuse to buy into the hype and make room to remember the reason for our hope

Not building our lives in possessions or possibilities... but in a promise-making and promise-keeping God.

To this I hold, my hope is only Jesus
For my life is wholly bound to His
Oh how strange and divine, I can sing, "All is mine"
Yet not I, but through Christ in me

Pray