

The messages coming out of Connecticut on Friday were horrifying. School on lockdown, injuries, deaths. As the day continued the news just kept getting worse. We would come to find out that sadly a young individual had killed 26 people including 20 school children. It's hard to imagine a worse message than that. But a message of good news was the actions taken by the teachers and administrators of the school. Teachers prepared for such an event by training immediately did what they were prepared to do. Locking doors, pulling shades, and doing what they could to keep the children calm. The message we get from them uplifts our hearts.

During the days that follow tragedy there is a renewed sense of spirituality among people and renewed calls to pray to God. These are good, but does the message stick. We know a news story like this will hang around for a while, but eventually it too will get bumped for something else. Eventually people will return to other messages. We'll all be joking about the world coming to end on December 21st before you know it. Those are messages not to be taken seriously. Yet where will the renewal because of tragedy go? Isn't that message strong enough to get people to wake up and think about their relationship with God? For some, yes. For most, no. But eventually a day will come with another message, it's too late. People won't get help that day. The reason, sin.

God sent Malachi as a prophet to the people of Israel. His message was to point to other messengers, two messengers, both important in God's plan. One would come slightly before the other, but the other would be more important. From the first lesson we get the important truth...

**God's messengers will come
To prepare the people
To refine the people**

For surprise birthday parties to work someone has to be the messenger. That's the person getting the birthday boy or girl to the party all the while alerting the people at the party of their arrival. The group doing the surprising needs to know when to hide. Texting has made that job easier. The messenger arrives at the surprise location. With a few clicks on the phone the message can be sent. "We're coming" or "Get ready". Then the party can get prepared. God wasn't trying to sneak up on anyone the first time he came. He wanted people prepared. So he sent a messenger, John the Baptist. He came so people knew God was coming.

Between Malachi's message of a messenger and the actual time John the Baptist came was 400 years. The people had to hear and remember Malachi's message. But 400 years is a long time to wait. So when the messenger came the people weren't thinking of Malachi's message. They weren't thinking God would be coming. They weren't prepared at all. Their sinfulness was so bad it clouded over any thoughts of a messenger or Messiah.

Christmas is only a week away. Is that surprising for anyone? December flies by every year. Shopping malls won't let you forget how many days of shopping, so we think presents are all Christmas is about. Restaurants hope you think Christmas is about taking your loved one out for a special dinner. Tragedies anywhere they happen make you think Christmas is about getting along with family, living at peace with neighbors, and treating everyone kindly. While these messages might prepare us for living Christmas here on earth, they leave us unprepared for what Advent is about. What about Jesus' second coming? For that we are hopelessly unprepared.

The people's hearts before Jesus started his ministry were not that far off from our hearts today. Misplaced priorities, incorrect thinking about the coming Messiah, and sinful tendencies left them and leave us threatened. So God sent his messenger to come right before the Lord Jesus and prepare the people. **"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me."** John the Baptist prepared the people's hearts to receive the Messiah. He urged the people to repent and get ready for the second messenger Malachi spoke of. **"Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire."** This messenger was the Messiah the people had been waiting for centuries to see.

In the midst of tragedy it's maybe hard to see God's love. Thousands want to say, why? But think of what would have happened if God hadn't sent his messenger to prepare people's hearts. Jesus would have come and no one would have known. No one would've cared. But God's love and grace sent John the Baptist to prepare people for Jesus. God's grace wants all people to enjoy the blessings Christ Jesus brings through his life. So God's grace prepares people. He prepares us through his gracious Word. Especially he prepares us for his second coming. He wants all people to know why and when. The greatest tragedy was that we sinned against God. Christ Jesus already has come to set us free from sin. His second coming will set us free from the bondage of this world to a freedom in heaven we can't imagine. Already today we stand right before God because of Christ. That's the good news in the face of tragedy. Christ will come again and it will surprise us. But we're prepared. The messenger prepares our hearts for Christ to return. **"Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come."** Thank God that in his grace he has sent a messenger to prepare his people.

I used to play football with my friends in the front yard. The edge of our grass and the road was our sideline. One guy playing quarterback would throw tough passes to those trying to catch the ball inbounds. It involved a lot of falling, sliding, and rolling on the grass. That meant stains. I know my mom wasn't expecting some of the bad grass stains I gave her. It required the heavy duty detergent. She always managed to separate stain from fabric. Malachi spoke of a messenger to prepare the people. The Messiah coming wasn't what they expected. He would be a Messiah who would refine the people, separate stain from fabric. Jesus' second coming is something we won't expect. Jesus will refine the people by separation.

People of this world have a lot of junk clinging to them. Sins that they may not even realize are sinful that cling to them like a stain. We have a lot of junk clinging to us too. Sin is impossible to get rid of even for Christians. We put our hope in the things we have. We want things that don't belong to us. We don't cling to God but to ourselves. Our whining and complaining makes us unworthy of standing before God. These sins and plenty of others are true for us and all people. Even heavy duty scrubbing on these sinful stains won't get them out. Left to ourselves when Christ returned we would be in trouble. **"Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?"** We wouldn't be able to stand. We need the messenger to refine us.

Refining is the process of burning off the worthless junk from the precious metal through fire. Christ is the refiner. He's not trying to hurt us but he does it for our good. **"For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap."** Jesus burns off our sin with a hot refiner's fire. Another way of thinking about it, Jesus washes away our stain of sin like someone washing clothes uses StainStick on the stain and scrubs it to lift the stain away. In the end the metal is pure, the clothes are pure. Our sins must be destroyed for us to be pure so we can stand before God. Jesus does that. The fire singes and hurts, the scrubbing doesn't always feel great. But we have confidence in the refiner and launderer. Christ knows what things to purge away so that what's left is pure. God is doing this continually by his grace and mercy. We're refined by reminder of the forgiveness of sins. Washed by Christ we're refined and ready for Christ to return.

As the Last Day gets ever closer continue to stand in Christ. Be secure in his love and forgiveness. Live that way. Worship him as a response to his grace. Give thank offerings to him standing right with God because of him. Bring those offerings knowing you're completely pure and right with God. Where can confidence like that come from? It only comes from your relationship with Christ.

Worst of all is that the messages coming from the northeast on Friday won't be the last. Somewhere, somehow another tragedy will take place. More messages will come out of grief and sadness. More messages calling for restrictions, changes, and policies. More people sending prayer messages to a God they barely believe in. No one understands the why of these tragedies. We can't even pinpoint what God uses them for. We just reach out to find another message from God. And we have one. John the Baptist came to prepare the people for their Savior. That Savior came with a message of forgiveness, peace with God, and a promise of heaven. We are prepared, we are refined in Christ, and we are ready for our messenger from God to return.