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Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come! Amen.  
Malachi 3:1-4

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

Lord God, holy Father, sanctify us by your truth; your word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends who desire the coming of the Lord,

If you look up the word “temple” in a bible dictionary, encyclopedia, or concordance, you find some interesting things. A temple is a house or dwelling of God, a building erected and set apart for the worship of God. The word is used in the Bible to refer to the tabernacle built in Moses’ day. Obviously it is used of Solomon’s temple. That temple was destroyed at the Babylonian captivity. The temple was rebuilt after that exile in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Only about twenty years before Christ’s birth that temple had been replaced by another built by Herod the great to win the allegiance of the Jews.

One would expect these to be referred to as temples. What may seem a bit unusual is that Jesus refers to his body as the temple: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days...the temple he had spoken of was his body.” [John 2:19,21] Colossians 2:9 says this about God’s dwelling place: “In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.”

Even more surprising is that God’s people are called his temple in which he dwells: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s spirit lives in you?” [1 Corinthians 3:16]

Our verses today relate to us how **The Lord Will Come To His Temple.** Obviously that means far more than that he will walk through the door of a building. The Lord came to his temple when he took on our flesh and blood and was born here on earth. The Lord comes to his temple when he works the miracle of faith in our hearts and sets us apart as his dwelling place. The Lord will come to his temple when he returns to judge the living and the dead and takes his own to be with him forever in the heavenly sanctuary. Our verses tell us three things in regard to our Lord’s coming. The Lord will send his messenger before him. The Lord will purify his people. And the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness.

God says, “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple.” We just read about that messenger who would come before him and prepare the way. That’s right, John the Baptizer. The Old Testament ends with God’s promise of the coming of that last prophet who would precede the coming of the Lord. It refers to him as “Elijah” because God would bestow on him the spirit and power of the great prophet Elijah.

This is how the Old Testament ends: “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.” [Malachi 4:5,6]

It is remarkable that the New Testament begins in the book of Luke in the temple in Jerusalem with Zechariah the priest burning incense to the Lord. The angel Gabriel appears and startles him with the news, “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to give him the name John...He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” [Luke 1:13,17] Zechariah the priest, like us, would have made the obvious connection with the final prophecy of the Old Testament.

Only six months later unborn John leaped for joy in his mother Elizabeth’s womb when Mary, in whose womb was the Savior, entered the room. Suddenly the Lord they were seeking had come to his temple. Thirty years later John prepared the way before the Lord by going “into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” [Luke 3:3] When John saw Jesus coming toward him he said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘a man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” Suddenly the Lord they were seeking had come to his temple.

To this day John continues to prepare the way before the Lord with his message of repentance and forgiveness of sins, and that message will continue to prepare the way until Jesus’ second coming in judgment as John describes: “His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

His coming is sudden. His coming is unexpected. Even though clearly foretold, still when the Son of God came, people were surprised. The same will be true of his second coming in judgment. “For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man.” [Matthew 24:27] One thing with lightning, once it strikes, it’s too late to get ready for it. If you get hit, chances are you’re dead. So when the Lord suddenly comes to his temple, our verses ask, “Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?” Our verses imply that no one can withstand that lightning.

Let me tell you about the “pastor’s nightmare.” This nightmare is common to most if not all pastors: It’s Saturday afternoon and the pastor is working outside in the garden. He’s sweaty, filthy, wearing old outdoor clothes with holes and covered with dirt. Suddenly he hears the church bell ring and remembers, “Oh yea, I was supposed to perform a wedding today.” How unprepared is he! Hopefully he wakes up at this point to realize that it was just a dream!

Will we be unprepared like that when the Son of God suddenly comes? How can we stand before him in the filth of our sins, in our failures to carry out our obligations to him, or even keep track of what our obligations are, and even the good things we have done are like filthy rags. Shall we say to him, “Yea I try to be a pretty good person.” Right! Our verse says, “He will be like a refiner’s fire (burning up the worthless dross)

or a launderer's soap (washing away anything impure). He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver." If we're going to trust in our own goodness and merits, there will be nothing left of us. Sin and failure is all that we by ourselves are, so the soap will completely wash us down the drain. Dross that we are, the refining fire will consume us.

But he is the messenger of the covenant, the covenant of God's grace and forgiveness, the covenant where he gives us his own righteousness, alone with which we can stand before him. Heed the word of his messenger: "Repent, the kingdom of heaven is near!" Receive the forgiveness the Lord comes to give you. The soap and the flames of his judgment shall not harm us, for already now he cleanses and purifies us for that day. "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." [1 John 1:7] 1 Peter 1:6,7 says, "Now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." Or as the hymn verse says, "When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply. The flames shall not hurt thee, I only design Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine."

This is why the Lord comes, to purify his people, and when they are purified our verse goes on to say: "then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in the days gone by, as in former years."

Cain's offering was not acceptable to God because it did not proceed from a heart of faith. Abel offered God a better sacrifice, by faith. Just a few verses after our text God accuses the people of robbing him in their tithes and offerings. Much more is being spoken of here than the mere money put into the offering plate at church. Our entire life of repentance and faith is our offering to God. Psalm 51:17,19 tells us: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.... Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar."

Suddenly the Lord will come to his temple. He has come to his temple—he has come to you—to your heart. He has worked there the miracle of repentant faith, cleansed and purified you of your sin and granted you his perfect righteousness. He has made you his own that you might bring him offerings in righteousness, offerings acceptable to him. Again, this is so much more than merely giving generous monetary contributions to him. This is your entire life, every day that he grants you the glorious privilege of serving him. He comes to you with his gospel to strengthen you. He comes to you with his sacrament to sustain you. He comes to you to grant you the boundless blessing of being his own and serving him with your life.

"Suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple." As we celebrate his first coming at Christmas, as we celebrate his coming to our hearts—every day growing in his word and serving him, as we eagerly anticipate his second coming in glory at the end of the world, may our prayer ever be: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."

Amen.

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority now and forever. Amen.