

ZEPHANIAH AND MALACHI

These small books pack a powerful double punch. Each begins with frightening descriptions of God's judgment to come. Each ends with the joyful promise of the day of the Lord. In these six chapters (three in each book), Christians find words that describe the first and second comings of Jesus.

We hear each prophet during worship on the second and third Sundays of Advent this year. Malachi 3:1-4 sounds like John the Baptist, *the messenger who prepares the way for Jesus*. Zephaniah 3:14-20 is an expression of joy for the coming time when God *restores your fortunes before your eyes*.

Malachi is quoted in music associated with Christmas:

Risen with healing in his wings (4:2) describes Jesus in "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing."

Who shall abide the day of his coming? (3:2) is the beginning of a portion of Handel's Messiah.

ZEPHANIAH

Zephaniah begins with dire warnings on Judah, the southern kingdom. Zephaniah brought God's word soon after Manasseh's evil 55-year rule had ended. His son Ammon had a very brief reign which ended with his assassination in 640 B.C. Manasseh had made idol worship and child sacrifice common. He "shed very much innocent blood, until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another." (2 Kings 21:16)

Josiah, only eight years old when he took the throne, was guided by wise men who trusted God. Zephaniah was one of the voices who showed why reform was necessary. Under Josiah, the temple was restored, and idols were removed. After scrolls of Scripture were discovered, Josiah insisted that the Passover be celebrated.

To learn more about the historical context, read 2 Kings 21-23 or 2 Chronicles 33-35.

The Day of the LORD

Zephaniah begins with the horrifying description of God coming to sweep everything away from the face of the earth. "On that day" Judah with its capital city of Jerusalem will be devastated. In chapter 2, God's punishment is directed at surrounding cities and nations. In chapter 3, "that day" becomes a day of healing, for the "proud" and "haughty" will be removed; the "humble and holy" will fill Jerusalem. Zephaniah concludes with a song of joy about God's renewing love. God says: "I will remove disaster from you ... I will bring you home ... Gather you ... restore your fortunes before your eyes."

MALACHI

Despite good leaders like King Josiah and the prophet Zephaniah, Judah continued to look to other gods, to seek protection from other countries, to ignore the Law of Moses, and to despise the prophets' words of passionate love and warning. The Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and many of the survivors were taken into exile. Under King Cyrus, they began to return. The temple was rebuilt. Faithful devotion to God gradually gave way to apathetic obedience and corruption.

Malachi – the name means "my messenger" – brings God's confrontation to half-hearted worship, the greed of the priests. People disrespect God. They rob from God because they do not tithe. God will come to judge and purify. It will be like a *Refiner's fire* (3:20) (This image of purifying comes from the process of refining silver). Yet like all the prophets, the real message is the invitation of our loving God, "*Return to me and I will return to you!*" (3:7)

The Day of the Lord

Malachi is unique in speaking of a "messenger" who prepares the way before the Lord comes. (3:1) He goes so far as to identify the prophet Elijah. (4:5) This verse is the basis for the Passover custom of leaving a cup for Elijah and going to the door to welcome Elijah in. Jesus names John the Baptist as Elijah in Matthew 11:14 and Matthew 17:9-13 and quotes from Malachi.