



# First United Church of Oak Park

## Return

Numbers Malachi 3:1-7

Lydia Mulkey

September 4, 2022

Let me paint a picture for you.

Wages are at record lows. Bosses increase their own salaries and the price of goods, but do not increase the wages for their laborers. Costs are up. The wealthy are powerful. The poor are plentiful. The ethnic makeup of the nation is rapidly changing. A sort of caste system has formed. Those lower in the system will step on anyone they need to in order to move up in the system. Those higher in the system no longer even recognize the ways in which they are standing on the necks of others. The wealthy have so much, they no longer see a need for religious life. They are too busy accumulating wealth. Religious leaders fail to see and call out the injustices and instead go along to get along. They don't want to upset the wealthiest folks who they hope will continue to fund their institutions. The poor are disillusioned with religion. If God is good, why are things the way they are? Everyone is disillusioned with politics. It seems like decisions are made by folks with money whose main interest is their own money and not the well-being of the nation. The evil prosper. Morality and ethics seem ineffective, so why bother? Occasionally someone tries to ask, "Why are things so bad?" "It's just the way things are," according to those at the top. Those at the bottom are too traumatized now to even try to fight back.

Where is this place? Or perhaps, where are these places... I could very easily have been talking about the United States of America in 2022, but, actually, I wasn't.

I'm speaking of ancient Israel. Malachi speaks to the Hebrew people after the time of the Babylonian exile. The brightest and best had been captured and deported at the will of the Babylonian empire. Now, after 70 years of captivity, they were free to return. Many did not. A few did. Those who returned found themselves in a country that was their home, but one they had never actually known. The prophets had said that one day they would return from exile to abundant harvest, a booming population, and a temple fuller of God's glory than ever before. They saw no evidence of any of that. They saw exploitation, greed, and poverty. They had only traumatic memories, current disappointments, and an all but lost faith. In Malachi the people dialogue with God about the current state of affairs, saying to God, "You reward evil and punish good," and God saying to the people, "I have given you a way out of this and you won't take it. Return to my way!"

This is not about individuals not doing right, this is about a community. A nation. The individual's right action is not rewarded in a society built on injustice. In the Hebrew Bible, the primary unit of life is the community, not the individual. And, in the Hebrew Bible, theology and ethics are inseparable. Therefore, what is theologically sound is action that is ethical and creates good for the community as a whole. While what is good for the community is good for the individual, the reverse has not always held true. Theological claims in the Hebrew Bible are going to be made primarily about how the society as a whole functions. It is challenging for our post-enlightenment western minds to get into that mindset of thinking about what's best for the society rather than what's best for the individual, and it often muddies our theology and our Biblical understanding.

If a society, if an economic system is built on injustice, inequality, and a lack of accountability, then the individual's piety cannot save them from those evils. The individual person's character and ethics will not somehow airlift them out of a corrupt system. For this reason, we hear as the divine concern, the ways of life, the social norms, the political ideologies that benefit the whole of society, protecting its vulnerable. The divine concern is not primarily the individual, their work ethic, or their upward mobility.

The people cry out, "You are not an ethical God!" in Malachi Chapter 2, and in Chapter 3 God responds, "I have not changed. I am ever ethical. You as a society have changed. Return to me." But the people say, "How?"

It's a valid questions. How? How does a society return to God?

In the United States, the religious right would have us believe that it is by allowing teachers to lead prayer in class, but not allowing them to say anything supportive of LGBTQ students. The religious right would have us believe it is by posting the Ten Commandments in halls of government. The religious right would have us believe it is by minimizing any government programs that protect the vulnerable and promote equity, and maximizing any government programs that control the vulnerable. Is that how you return to God? Do you say prayers and post signs? Do you look out for number one and blame "the way things are," as if this unethical way of life was ordained at the creation?

We look around at our own realities on this Labor Sunday and say, "God, where are you? You reward evil and punish good!" The federal minimum wage has not changed in 13 years. The minimum wage today will buy you less than it has since the 50s. When you factor in the consumer price index, if you were making minimum wage in 1968, you made 40% more than minimum wage workers make today. Minimum wage is nearly cut in half.

In fact, let me paint a picture for you of what that does to a society...

Wages are at record lows. Bosses increase their own salaries and the price of goods, but do not increase the wages for their laborers. Costs are up. The wealthy are powerful. The poor are plentiful. The ethnic makeup of the nation is rapidly changing. A sort of caste system has formed. Those lower in the system step on anyone they need to in order to move up in the system. Those higher in the system no longer even recognize the ways in which they step on others daily. The wealthy have so much, they no longer see a need for religious life. They are too busy accumulating wealth. Religious leaders fail to see and call out the injustices and instead go along to get along. They don't want to upset the wealthiest folks who they hope will continue to fund their institutions. The poor are disillusioned with religion. If God is good, why are things the way they are? Everyone is disillusioned with politics. It seems like decisions are made by folks with money whose main interest is their own money and not the well-being of the nation. The evil prosper. Morality and ethics seem ineffective, so why bother? Occasionally someone tries to ask, "Why are things so bad?" "It's just the way things are," according to those at the top. The way things are... you mean, this is one of the immutable laws set forth in the creation of the world? If that's the case, the people rightly cry out, "You are not an ethical God!" and in 2022, God responds, "I have not changed. I am ever ethical. You as a society have changed. Return to me." But the people say, "How?"

It's a valid question. How? How do we as a society return to God?

Just as it was in the Hebrew Bible, theology and ethics are inseparable. God is ethical. And a return to God is a return to a just and ethical society. Ghanaian theologian John S. Pobee says, "Authentic theology includes education of the ear to hear the cry of the people, of the heart to heed and to feel, of the tongue to speak to the weary and broken a word that rebuilds them and kindles in them a fire of hope, and of the hands to work with the lowly to build a human world which the wealthy and the clever have shown themselves to be incapable of envisioning and fashioning."

I don't have a "here's one thing you can do when you get home to create a more just society" for you. I wouldn't dare simplify it that much, but I will tell you that when it all seems to have gone down the tubes, be assured that God has not changed. God has not decided to reward evil and punish good. That's not God. God has not become evil. God has not become ok with exploitation, greed, and poverty. God has not decided the CEOs really do deserve to hoard the resources and the working class should live in poverty. Even when everything around you has changed into something evil, God has not. God was just. God is just. We must tune our ears, hearts, tongues, and hands to who God is and to where God is calling us and our society as a whole. We are called to return.

Amen.