

## YEATS AND MALACHI

### Malachi 3:1-4; 4:2-6

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Second Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2021, at the 8:30 a.m. service of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### READING

*“The Second Coming”*

*William Butler Yeats (1919)*

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full passionate intensity.*

*Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?<sup>1</sup>*

### SCRIPTURE

#### **Malachi 3:1-4**

*See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.*

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 1989; [poetryfoundation.org](http://poetryfoundation.org).

**Malachi 4:2-6**

*But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.*

*Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.*

*Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.*

I.

A few months ago I read a fascinating article by a venerable poet and literary critic at Harvard named Helen Vendler. Her article concerns the oft-quoted poem by William Butler Yeats entitled “The Second Coming.”<sup>2</sup>

Doubtless you have heard lines from this poem in speeches and writings by people like many of us: people who long for civility in politics, for bipartisanship, for reasoned discussion, for constructive compromise, and for an atmosphere in all our institutions, public and private, that seeks to both include and unite all of us. Among such a group – diminishing as we may be – Yeats’ opening lines are familiar as lament over the state of affairs that existed when he wrote the poem in 1919.

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold...  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

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I have heard these words so many times, I decided to ask an esteemed member of the 8:30 a.m. congregation of Westminster – whom I knew to have access to research tools beyond my own – if he could find out how many times these words have been read on the floor of the House or Senate or been entered into the *Congressional Record*. His findings exceeded my expectations.

- Since 1960 alone, the poem has been quoted more than fifty times in Congress.
- Senators as varied as Barry Goldwater, John Kerry, Chris Dodd, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan have given voice to it.
- Sen. Paul Simon entered an entire sermon that featured it, given by the Pastor of Mr. Vernon Unitarian Church in Alexandria.
- Representative Jim Leech quoted it in a speech against a constitutional amendment to ban flag burning; while Representative Robert Dornan quoted it in a speech opposed to opening military service to gays and lesbians.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Helen Vendler, “Loosed Quotes,” in *Liberties*, Volume I, Number 1 (Fall 2020), available at <https://libertiesjournal.com/articles/loosed-quotes/>.

<sup>3</sup> These stats come from the Congressional Research Service.

One British observer has said: “The more quotable Yeats seems to commentators and politicians, the worse things are.”<sup>4</sup>

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Yet the despair out of which Yeats drafted the poem was real. He began it in January 1919.

- The First World War was barely over, and the war had not ended all wars
- The Russian Revolution, which dismayed Yeats, was still unfolding
- His native Ireland was dividing north and south, Catholic and Protestant, royalist and independent
- His daughter Anne was born in a fragile state as his wife, Georgie had been stricken by Spanish flu – that era’s pandemic.

Yeats’ despair led him to place, at the center of the poem, a vision of the Second Coming, but leaving it up to the reader to determine whether it was the Second Coming of Christ or a foreboding figure from the Book of Revelation known as the “Anti-Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

When Yeats writes

...now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle...

he is depicting the end of 2000 years of Christian dominance of the West. The poem ends in anxious uncertainty as to what will replace established Christian culture:

...what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

## II.

Enter Malachi.

In the arrangement of the books within the Protestant Bible, Malachi – which means “My Messenger” – closes the New Testament with words of anticipation of “The Great Day of the Lord.”

It is a mixed day, not one without its threats, but the threats seem reserved for the *truly* evil:

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<sup>4</sup> Dorian Lynskey, “‘Things fall apart’: the apocalyptic appeal of WB Yeats’s *The Second Coming*,” *The Guardian* 5/30/2020 available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/30/things-fall-apart-the-apocalyptic-appeal-of-wb-yeats-the-second-coming>. The quote is from journalist Fintan O’Toole.

<sup>5</sup> Revelation 13.

See [says Malachi], the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.

Speaking for God to the people of Israel, Malachi continues with words of hope:

But for *you who revere* my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.

You shall go out *leaping like calves* from the stall...

Then Malachi concludes:

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.

He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents,

so that I will *not* come and strike the land with a curse.

Late, when Matthew and Luke write their gospels, they equate the Elijah-like messenger Malachi depicts with John the Baptist, announcing the coming of God's Kingdom – the "First Coming" – in the ministry of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, in Mark's Gospel, John's clothing is equated with Elijah's<sup>7</sup>

While Malachi's vision is *no less threatening* to the wicked than Yeats "rough beast...slouching towards Bethlehem," Malachi is *more hopeful* in promising "the sun of righteousness rising, with healing in its wings" and with turning "the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents." In Malachi's vision, perhaps things do come back together; perhaps "the centre [does] hold."

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In the *first* passage we read from Malachi, the threat of punishment and judgment is more pronounced, but Malachi's *hopefulness* shines through as well.

- While a "refining" and "purifying" of "the descendants of Levi" – the priests in Israel – *sounds* threatening to us, such warnings are presented as a *refining and purifying* that leads the priestly class to "present [their] offerings to the Lord in righteousness," offerings that promise to be "*pleasing* to the Lord."
- In Malachi's vision, whatever "refining" and "purifying" happen are for *renewal, re-creation, healing, making new, not for death and destruction*.

In reading scripture, we cannot do justice to the entirety of the book by simply *overlooking* or *leaving out* passages of judgement, but we are on *firm* theological ground when – as in this passage – we see God's *judgment* as always being subservient to God's *mercy*. We are "refined" and "purified" for *life and service*, not *death and punishment*.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 3:1-3, Luke 3:1-6. See also Mark 1:2-3n in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), page 1804.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 1:6 and II Kings 1:8), and those who put John to death wonder if he is Elijah returned (Mark 6:14).

That is the good news of the First Coming. That is the good news of the Second Coming, no matter how often we see it depicted otherwise in books and movies, television shows and video games, and from TV preachers whose faces shout our direction from the other side of our screens.

### III.

I don't claim to know any more than Yeats what it will take for us to find *healing*: for our world, our nation, our families, our local communities, our congregations, our Christian presence and witness. With every passing week, with every passing headline, we see evidence of the opposite: this week with a troubled teenager shooting students and teachers at his school and parents "turning their hearts to their children" in the most bizarre way and with arguments before the Supreme Court that may lead to a ruling that will make us feel, once again, that "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

I don't *know* if the Savior – presumably displaced – is ever to return, though I *believe* he will.

I don't know if in these Advent days – the Savior is *slouching* or even *striding* towards Bethlehem – towards a birth that will heal us in ways we have long since given up on being healed.

I don't know if we have any hope of coming through this strange and awful period "leaping like calves from the stall."

But if we are at the end of "twenty centuries of stony sleep," with promises of awakening only to those who undergo "refining" and "purifying," I pray that such "refinement" and "purification" will come to the places in our lives where we *need* it, and will come to our nation in the places we *need* it, and will come to this 2000 year old entity known as Christianity in the places we *need* it.

If we are to be "refined" and "purified," I pray that we will have the courage to turn towards it, to welcome it – albeit with fear and trembling, but also with wonder and hope – trusting that whatever "refinement" and "purification" we receive will be from the hand of God and will ultimately be part of our healing.

My prayer is that "refined" and "purified," we will not slouch towards Bethlehem, but take small steps, then walk, then jog, then sprint, even if our tools of transport are less our legs and feet than our arms and wheelchair, our cane and crutches.

As we move towards Bethlehem this year, not needing to slouch, I pray we will welcome, despite all odds, the Savior born there, welcome, perhaps less alone this year than last, welcome with a glimmer and sparkle in our eyes that reveals a broad and joyful smile that not even our masks can hide.

Amen.