

Living the Prophecies of the Advent

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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As we approach the celebration of the Lord's birth into the world a special part of our preparation is to reflect on the beautiful prophecies of the Old Testament that prepared the world itself for that event. We hear and read fragments of many of these prophecies throughout the season as radio, television and commercial businesses all work to evoke the sentimental feelings of peace and goodwill that are associated with the Biblical story. But what do these prophecies really mean in our lives today? How are they relevant, and how are they fulfilled for us?

One, from key verses in our lesson from Malachi, sums up the basic purpose of all the prophecies from Genesis to the events of the Gospels.

“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts. “But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?” (Malachi 3:1-2)

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse” (Malachi 4:5-6).

Here we read that the essential purpose of prophecy is preparation – preparation lest the state of our lives be so contrary to the purity and intensity of the Lord's love that His coming brings a curse rather than a blessing. It's a little like a teacher's warning to study before a test so you can do well, or a coach's warning to get in shape so that you can enjoy the activities you're going to do without getting hurt.

Specifically, the preparation for the Lord's coming is said to be accomplished by the prophet “turning the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.” This is a curious statement in light of the Lord's own words quoting the prophet Micah (7:6) and teaching that He came “to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law,” and that “a man's foes would be those of his own household” (Matt. 10:34-36). But the teachings are one in that they both refer to internal conflicts within the minds of individuals, warning that *these conflicts must be resolved* if we are to receive the Lord with integrity.

In the Word “fathers” represent the loves from which all thoughts and actions spring, and “children,” particularly sons, represent the truths (or ideas of truth) that take form in our minds as expressions of these loves. Sometimes children become separated from their fathers, and so our thought processes can become separated from the loves that should be guiding them. Like young men in defiance of their fathers we sometimes get carried away with our intellectual conceit and neglect our responsibility to respect the influence of love. In effect this is faith alone which cannot heal or save. So it is critical that the goods and truths of spiritual life be fully reconciled – like fathers and sons – in our lives in preparation for the coming of the Lord.

Now the message of Malachi is that the prophets – particularly Elijah – will bring about this reconciliation. But who is Elijah in our lives, and how will this be done?

In Old Testament times the relatively primitive tribal peoples didn't know much about the deeper significance of things like the reconciliation of fathers and sons. They simply saw the teachings on a literal or external level of application and worked with them that way. So, for example, Balaam's prophecy, "I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a star shall come out of Jacob; a sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult" (Num. 24:17) was seen purely as a sign of worldly things to come, when a national king would assume control of Israel and free that state from the bondage of tribute to a foreign power. It was the same with all the familiar prophecies of Isaiah, such as the ones about people walking in darkness and seeing a great light (ch's 9 and 60), the rod coming forth from the stem of Jesse (ch. 11), the voice of one crying in the wilderness (ch. 40) and many others.

Whether or not these prophecies were ever intended to be taken in some literal way, we know that their essential message is in the spiritual sense. But the great thing about them is that no matter how they are or were understood historically, they did and still do call attention to the immanent presence of God through His Word, and thus to the need for repentance, reformation and renewal of life, whether on a national or personal level. And here's the remarkable thing: whether they are understood correctly or not they have the power of keeping people focused and connected with His love, and inspired with hope.

This is no small thing. The doctrines of the New Church are insistently clear that it is actually through love – not understanding – that we are connected with the Lord. Understanding is an instrument of love: it can strengthen love; it can affirm it and protect it and give it form, but it cannot by itself connect us with the Lord. On the other hand, even a wrong understanding of truth can serve the purposes of genuine love if it comes from innocence and humility. As we say, it's the motive that counts.

Still, the motive has to be provided – somehow – by the Lord. So throughout the centuries, even as the understanding of genuine truth slipped farther and farther into obscurity, the Lord provided a means of communication and connection with Him through the simple hope (and sometimes fear) of His coming as predicted by the prophets. And even though this process was limited to a tiny region of the middle-east, it was sufficient to provide a link to heaven for the whole world (TCR 267 & SS 104-106).

People honored the prophecies and through them the Lord, even if only for natural reasons. But in the end, when there were no longer any good loves, but only selfish and worldly interests associated with them, or as the Writings say, "when [true] love had been reduced to nothing" (AC 2034:6), there was a complete "disconnect" and the Lord finally had to come into the world in person. But even then, the Lord was not so much concerned with providing understanding as He was with providing a dynamic presentation of His love. The purpose of His teaching was to lead people from what was familiar to them (and worldly) to what was unfamiliar (and spiritual), and of course mostly to re-connect the truth of the Word with His own Divine goodness.

This is still so today. For the Lord has come again in the historical and prophetic Writings for the New Church. And despite of the overwhelming appearance that it is all directed to the

understanding, the truth is that here, now, as always, the Lord has no other end in view than His conjunction with the human race through love.

This, therefore, is the reconciliation provided by the prophets: we learn the truth as it appears to us (according to our finite limitations, more or less according to our ability, culture, science, and other factors) and through that, however simple or profound, we connect with the love that is the source and substance of this appearance. Truths are then connected with good, and good with truths, which process not only prepares us for the Lord, it actually causes Him to appear!

So how are the Old Testament prophecies living in us today? How are we living them? Let's take an example or two and think about them.

As noted earlier, Balaam once said in prophecy, "I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a star shall come out of Jacob; a scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult." Time in the spiritual sense is a function of the state of mind. We know it passes "quickly" when we're enjoying ourselves and "slowly" when we're not. So the prophecy speaks to a state in which the Lord is not yet very near to our hearts. But it assures us that we will see the Lord when the state is right. So... when is that?

The star rising out of Jacob is the knowledge of the Lord in the higher parts of the natural mind. We can't receive the Lord until we know something about Him, and this knowledge has the particular quality of insight, lifting our mind's eye upward toward Him. The scepter coming out of Israel, battering the brow of Moab is the power and authority of the spiritual mind subduing and controlling the natural affections and so at the same time overcoming the fallacies of the senses – "the sons of tumult." These are the conditions we must meet in order to experience the fulfillment of this prophecy in our lives. But the reality is that we are living the prophecy today, that is, exactly to the extent that the star of knowledge does not rise out of the Jacob within us, exactly to the extent that our spiritual mind does not have power and authority over our natural affections, we are still waiting for the Lord.

Another familiar prophecy in Isaiah reads,

"'Comfort, yes, comfort My people!' says your God. 'Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.'

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken'" (Isaiah 40:1-5).

Now in the Gospel of John (paraphrasing) the Lord tells us that in the world we will have tribulation, but to be of good cheer, for He has overcome the world (John 16:33). He also speaks of Himself as the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, and "the Spirit of truth" that will come when we are prepared (John 14:16, 26-27). Clearly the comfort referenced in this prophecy is not natural luxury or even natural peace, but the spiritual peace that comes with an orderly spiritual life.

And here's an important point: - we are told again and again at the end of the Gospels and in the heavenly doctrines that the war against evil and falsity is over, the darkness, the gloom and the tumult have all been overcome. The Lord in His Divine Humanity has fought for us and won! He has subjugated the hells, restored order in the heavens and established a new church on earth in which spiritual goodness and truth are readily available for our use. He has redeemed us. *But we still have to receive this in our hearts and minds or it will have no real affect on us.*

So the prophet speaks in the wilderness about preparing the way, about making a highway in the desert, building up valleys, bringing down mountains, making crooked places straight and rough places smooth. The verses conjure up images of modern highway construction, and of course that's WORK – but we need to be clear on what kind of work, and how it's done.

Imagine, then, a rock mountain that needs to be leveled: you could pick at it for 100 years and not make any meaningful progress, but if you were to go around and strategically place charges of dynamite and bring in heavy equipment to move the shattered rock you could build a highway in relatively short order. In this analogy we can think of the strategy as *our* work but the dynamite and heavy equipment as the Lord's, since all the real power to make this happen comes from Him. So the teaching is that when we do our part to clear the obstacles in our lives, acknowledging that all the real power to do so is His, He will make it happen....

The wilderness where Isaiah taught is the barren state of our own minds before the Lord comes. The highway through it is the way of life that the Lord teaches. The valleys are the low states, the depressing states that get filled up when we come out of ourselves and do useful things for others. The mountains are the highs, the states of arrogance, feelings of superiority that must be brought down through the recognition of our real faults and limitations. The crooked places – obviously – are our dishonest ways, our tendencies like streams and trails to go the routes of least resistance. The rough places are the nasty parts, where we treat each other with contempt. These last especially need to be straightened out and cleared up if we want the Lord to be with us.

But to return to the prophecy of Malachi, remember that the Lord said He would come suddenly. Other prophecies say quickly. In the spiritual sense all this means certainly, and here we understand this as absolutely, positively, and, yes, immediately – when the conditions are met. The influx of the Lord's light and love is unceasing. It is the reason for our existence – which is a process of perpetual creation. Therefore the very moment, the very instant that the outward conditions are right, His love and wisdom spontaneously flow in and bring spiritual life: peace, joy, delight, gratitude, understanding, patience, goodwill, and all the other beautiful qualities of heavenly life to our minds.

Can we receive and hold this influx? Can we believe it is present with us? If so we are invited by the Lord to enjoy the fulfillment of all the wonderful, inspiring prophecies of His Advent now, day by day, any day; every day. If not, well, they will remain prophecies for us and we will be like Israel before the Advent, only taking hope and consolation in the promise that this happy state may yet come to us when we are finally ready.

Amen.