**B.C. (Before Christmas) – Week 4 – Malachi: A Sign of Love**

**Message Big Idea**: Jesus came to show us how much we are loved.

**Scripture:** Malachi 1:1-2, Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 1:11-17, Luke 1:26-38, Mark 1:2b-4, John 1:29-31, Romans 5:6-8, Titus 3:3-7

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**Introduction: Worst Christmas Gifts**

*(Series Graphic)* We are so close to Christmas! And you know what that means? *(Pause)* That’s right…presents! I was looking for some Christmas gifts the other day for my family, and I came across a website highlighting the worst Christmas gifts. I thought I’d share a few with you.



First, this gift was for a young man who wanted a pair of Beats by Dre. If you don’t know what they are, they are $300 noise-canceling headphones. A little pricey so apparently someone in his family thought this would be an adequate substitute*(Pair of beets)*. I don’t think those beets do any noise canceling.



Then there’s this guy, *(Outfit)* who received the exact same outfit he was wearing. Seriously, if you were the gift-giver imagine the moment you first see the person on the day you exchange gifts! Thank God for gift receipts!

Finally, we all probably have that person in our family who likes to give gifts that use plenty of intrigue and misdirection. Imagine you receive this. *(Picture 1)* Like the picture says, you’re thinking, “Meh.” But once you tear off the wrapping you find this! *(Picture 2)* Whoa! A new iPhone! Not at all what you were expecting! But then you open the box and it’s this. *(Picture 3)* Well, at least you have a frying pan to whack the person with!



One of the guys on our staff told me about the Christmas his brother gave empty Mac Book Pro boxes to his three sisters-in-law. They literally cried with joy upon seeing the boxes and then with fury when they realized they were empty. So cruel!

Have you ever been disappointed with a Christmas gift? Or disappointed that someone else returned the give you gave? Disappointment can be a challenge when it comes to gift-giving, but it’s even more challenging when it comes to our real, day-to-day lives. It’s the disappointment we feel…

* When we don’t get the promotion. Or…
* When the relationship doesn’t work out. Or…
* When life simply isn’t what we imagined it would be.

What do we do then? How do we deal with disappointment? Well, today, we’re going to learn about a group of people who were facing disappointment.

**Introduction to Malachi**

*(Series Graphic)* Over the last few weeks we’ve been learning about the story of God and his people in the time, **B.C. - Before Christmas**. During this time, God sent prophets to speak words of wisdom, warning, and encouragement. These prophets had names like Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the prophet we’re going to learn about today…Malachi. Here’s the background to Malachi’s story.

**Video: Malachi Background**

*(Series Graphic)* The people in Malachi’s day were disappointed. They’d been through a lot. They had been conquered by the Babylonians and carried off into exile. Years later, they were allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple, but the rebuilt temple was nowhere near as grand and glorious as its predecessor. They were still under foreign rule. It seemed so many of God’s promises had not been fulfilled. And it’s in the middle of all this disappointment that the Word of the Lord comes to his prophet, Malachi, in approximately 430 B.C.

**Word: Malachi**

The book of Malachi begins with these words:

**“A prophecy: The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi.**

**‘I have loved you,’ says the Lord.” -Malachi 1:1-2a**

Now in the original Hebrew, these words from God have a special emphasis that is hard to capture in English. God is emphatically telling his people: “I have loved you this whole time. I’ve never stopped loving you!”

Yet the people respond: *(add)*

**“How have you loved us?” -Malachi 1:2b**

Their disappointment causes them to question whether they really are loved. They look around at their circumstances and think, “God, you haven’t come through for us. How can you say you love us?”

Can you hear the hurt in their question? Maybe even a little anger? Have you ever felt that way yourself?

It’s pretty common to feel disappointment when life seems to deal us a bad hand.

* Maybe you used to have a vision of your life where you were in control and on top of things. But then you got sick and that changed everything.
* Or you thought your family life was close to perfect. But then you learned about the affair and now find yourself divorced.
* Or maybe things are actually going well. You can point to so many good things, and yet something still seems to be missing – something that gnaws at your sense of fulfillment.

*(TP share personal story about disappointment)* When I think of my own life, most of the disappointments I’ve experienced in the past few years have been relational. There are some friendships that were once the bedrock of my relational world that feel like they have broken down. People I did life with and who I carried out the mission with who no longer are a part of our church. In some cases, I’m not even sure they are following Jesus anymore. And I know that stuff like this happens and friendships often have seasons. Change is probably inevitable. But still, I feel disappointment in this area of my life. And my guess is you have some area of your life where you feel disappointment too.

Here’s the thing about these disappointments – often the holidays, like Christmas, just make it worse. The familiar place, routine, or tradition you once shared has slipped from your life, and it’s not the same. No amount of hype or positive thinking makes it right again.

Maybe we don’t say it aloud, but often when we’re feeling the sting of our disappointments, we, too, can begin to doubt God’s love. We feel like he’s let us down. We wonder why if he really does love us, why it seems he isn’t coming through?

That’s how the people in Malachi’s day felt. Yet, it’s in the middle of all this disappointment, that the Word of the Lord comes to Malachi promising a sign of love.

**“’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.” -Malachi 3:1**

Malachi declares that hope will come. God promises that One will be coming who will give them a fresh start. And this promised One will be preceded by a messenger, a forerunner who will prepare the way for his coming.

However, after God says all this through the prophet Malachi, he goes silent. For 400 years, nothing. No more prophets. No more words from the Lord. Until… A birth is announced. And not just one birth, but two.

**The Christmas Story**

*(Luke 1:11-12)* Fast-forward to the end of these 400 years of silence, and an angel of the Lord appears to an aging priest named Zechariah. The angel tells him that his wife, Elizabeth, will bear him a son. They are to give him the name “John.”

Then, six months later, another angel visits a young woman named Mary.

**“The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.’” -Luke 1:28-32a**

These two pregnant women, Elizabeth and Mary, were from the same family, maybe fourth cousins. They rejoiced in each other’s news, and in time, both gave birth to sons.

Elizabeth’s boy, John, grew up and became the forerunner Malachi had prophesied about. He called people to repentance and baptism. The people began to wonder if he was the promised Messiah, but John declared:

**“I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” -Luke 3:16**

As the forerunner, John pointed people to Jesus. *(Malachi 3:1)* For the son who was born to Mary was no ordinary child. He is the Lord coming to his temple, the messenger of a new covenant, the Savior we long for come into the world.

**A Revelation of God’s Love**

Understand, Jesus’ coming to earth is not just a sweet story we tell at Christmas; it is a revelation of God’s love.

If you ever doubt you are loved, just look to the **Cradle**.

Let me say this and please try to hear it like it’s the very first time, ok? **On Christmas night - God, Almighty God, Lord of Heaven and Earth, sovereign Creator of the universe, gave up everything to become one of us.** And not just one of us, the very **least** of us – a baby, in a cradle. One writer put it this way:

**“God was given eyebrows, elbows, two kidneys, and a spleen. He came not as a flash of light or an unapproachable conqueror, but as one whose first cries were heard by a peasant girl and a sleepy carpenter. The hands that first held him were unmanicured, calloused and dirty. No silk. No ivory. No hype. No party. No hoopla. Angels watched as Mary changed God’s diaper.” -Max Lucado**

Matthew, the tax collector and writer of the first book in the New Testament, describes his coming this way:

**“She will give him the name Jesus, and He will save the people from their sins.” -Matthew 1:21**

Now I think our tendency is to hear that as a standard Bible reading for the Christmas season, but let’s reflect on that truth, ***“He will save the people from their sins.”*** We may not be all that comfortable with the word “sin,” but we have to get the significance of it.

Theologian Cornelius Plantinga says that **“Sin is the culpable disturbance of shalom.”** It’s an attack on the kingdom of God and all that is good and hopeful. It’s all that we experience in this world that is not as it should be because God’s goodness and wholeness has been disrupted. We have been hurt by sin and likely hurt others in return. And yet Jesus chose to come live in the midst of the havoc sin has created.

Before Jesus, no one had ever been born who could save people from their sins. And how did he take on sin? Matthew continues:

**“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel – which means God with us.” -Matthew 1:23**

**Jesus in the cradle means that God loves us enough to be with us in this sin-soaked world**. God takes on flesh and becomes human. Theologians call this The Incarnation. It means he literally, physically, historically, and tangibly came to be *with* us even in our deepest disappointments in this broken world.

And throughout his time on earth he loved like no one has ever loved.

* He loved the **rich young ruler** and the **woman caught in adultery**.
* He loved **Peter**, one of his best friends, who denied him three times, and he loved **John** who stayed with him every step of the way.
* He loved the cheating **tax collector** and the **widow** who gave away her last penny.
* He loved everyone. No exceptions. No deceptions. He simply loved.

And yet ***“he was despised and rejected by men”*** to such an extent that this baby who was born into our world became a grown man who faced the cruelest of deaths – a death on the cross. Yes, Jesus knew disappointment. He was rejected and killed by the very people he came to save.

And why did he do it? Because he loved us. Understand, he didn’t **have** to die. Don’t ever let anyone tell you that Jesus had to die or that it was the wrath of God that forced him to the cross. Jesus **chose** this path. At any moment he could have walked away. But instead he chose to experience the most gruesome and excruciatingly painful death one could endure. Why? For the love of you and me. To save us from our sins.

The Apostle Paul describes it this way:

**“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” -Romans 5:8**

Jesus came to save us from all of the disappointments we experience because of our sin-ridden world. While we can’t always escape the effects of sin, the cross gives us hope in the present and the promise of a future where there is no more pain, no more sin, no more disappointment.

So if you still doubt he loves you this Christmas, look beyond the cradle to the cross.

What looked like a disappointing defeat, ended in an astonishing victory. Jesus rose from the dead giving us a hope that even the most devastating circumstances cannot erase.

If you doubt God loves you this Christmas, look to the cradle and to the cross. -- But don’t just look, my ask is that you would respond. And here are two ways you can respond.

**Invitation: Come Back**

The first response is an invitation: **Come back.** That’s right. Come back to God. If you have been around Community for any time at all you know we’re all about helping people find their way back to God.

Maybe you have been coming here for a while now. And you are beginning to understand who Jesus is – Immanuel, God with us, our Savior and Lord.

Today can be the day when you finally say *“I am yours, Jesus, I want to follow you.”* It doesn’t mean you have no doubts or that you’ve stopped wondering why life is so full of disappointment. It just means that you, like the prophet Malachi, choose to put your hope in the one who has come to save you – this baby who become a man who chose to die rather than live without you.

*(Picture)* That is Dan’s story, and here is how he told it when he was baptized in August at our Lincoln Park location. Dan writes:

*Prior to joining Community and becoming a Christian, I had little or no relationship with God. I didn’t believe human beings needed God, and didn’t believe in the God of the Bible, even though I went to church as a child. By the time I was in my 30’s, my life seemed alright – I had a fairly successful career and friends and family who were supportive. However, on the inside I struggled with stress, anxiety, and a lack of self-confidence. In 2017, I left my job, broke up with my girlfriend, and moved, all within the span of a few months. All this change made me more open to exploring the nagging urge that had remained with me to seek God in a new way.*

*Based upon nothing more than a Google search, I decided to attend Community. Eric and Kevin were the first people I met. I quickly joined Kevin’s small group and started volunteering with setup / teardown and First Impressions. Community was* ***exactly*** *what I needed: a church that explains the core concepts of the Bible and encourages each person to seek a stronger relationship with God. Through my journey over the past 2 years, I have gained a relationship with God that I never thought possible, and re-oriented my goals and ambitions to better serve Him. In November of 2018, I met Amy, now my fiancée, who is an amazing example of someone who walks with God. She and I attend church together, read books by Christian authors, and listen to sermons. I am looking forward to continuing to find ways to know and serve God better!*

Do you see how it was disappointment that led Dan back to God? Stress, anxiety, leaving his job, breaking up with his girlfriend. I don’t know what disappointments you carry with you today, but would you bring them to Jesus? Would you bring them to the one who promises to get you through whatever this life brings your way?

**Charge: Go Out**

So the first response is an invitation to come back, and the second is a charge to **Go out.** When we find our way back to God, it’s then our turn to go out and share the love we have found with others.

For some people, Christmas is the “most wonderful time of the year.” They love everything about this season – the gifts, the decorations, the 24/7 Christmas music. And for others, Christmas magnifies their hurts and disappointment unlike any other time of the year. For either person, I can’t think of a better time to invite them to Community. It might just be the next step they need to take to find their way back to God.

And so I want to leave us all with a charge to “go out” and invite our friends, family, neighbors, co-workers…anyone we know to join us for Christmas Eve services. Invite them to come discover a love they have never known. Your invitation may be the key moment that helps them find their way back to God.

**Conclusion**

*(Series Graphic)* At Christmas, we celebrate that love has come into the world.

When life feels disappointing, we can look to the cradle and to the cross to remember we are loved.

For unto us a Savior has been born.

He is Immanuel, God with us.

He is an everlasting sign of love.

**Communion Idea**

“In the Christian story God descends to reascend. He comes down; down to the very roots and sea-bed of the nature he has created. But he goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him.” –C.S. Lewis, Miracles.

In the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus it is like a great strong man who has before him a great and heavy burden and he stoops or descends to pick it up, and in his stooping he is nearly lost from view, but then in one great moment he straightens his back and carries the great mass on his back.

When we gather together in this moment we remember that in the midst of all of our pain, disappointment, and sin that Jesus. The Son of God came down to us – he bent down in the incarnation, vanished from sign in his death, but demonstrated resurrection power as he stood up out of the grave. That means for you and me when we are looking at our sad state and disputing the love of God and those around us, that if we will move toward him, he will lift us out of our states and fill us with life that satisfies the longings of our hearts.