Malachi 4:1-2a “Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the Lord Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.”

This particular Sunday is called: The Sunday of Last Judgment. It is a part of the church year, actually the end of the church year. The last four Sunday’s of the church year are designated by these themes: Reformation (that was last Sunday), Last Judgment, Saints Triumphant and Christ the King. These Sundays have been a part of the church year for centuries, although our previous hymnal did not name them in this way.

What exactly is the focus of Last Judgement? The Christian Worship Planning manual has this note, *“The readings for this Sunday set in sharp contrast the attitudes of believers and unbelievers. The attitude of the unbeliever to any talk of judgment by God can be only denial or terror. But the attitude of a child of God is formed by the Word of God. As that Word has created his faith during his life on earth, so it molds his confidence in the face of death and judgment. Both the Word of God and the faith if creates will be seen as fully vindicated by death and judgment. Therefore we look forward to death by which we pass into the courtroom of God to hear the “Not guilty?” verdict, which brought us to faith in the first place. There is no better preparation for death and judgment than a firm clinging to that gracious verdict; there is no better life than the one that has that verdict as its center and its motivation for all that we do.”*

Not a bad note at all? It is a note that does indeed point out the fact that there is a difference between the believer and the unbeliever, not only in attitude and heart but in the final destination that God has decreed for both. Let’s take a closer look at the Last Judgment of God for the world. Our theme will be: **THE DAY!**

We get an immediate sense of what this prophecy is about as we look at just the first few words of what God decrees. Our text says, **“Surely the day is coming.”** We know what this text is speaking of and we know the implication and import of those words. We know that in two ways. First, there is the immediate context. The immediate context is that of judgment upon the world. Second there is the fact that the phrase **“the day is coming”** is a well-known Biblical cliché for the judgment day of the world. Believe me when I say there is no doubt as to what this is talking about. Here is God forewarning, God revealing that the time will come when He will judge the world and all the souls who have ever been a part of it.

What does God reveal about his judgment to come? He reveals the very thing we learn in other passages. Consider John 5:28-29 where Jesus speaks of the judgment. He says, **“A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”** Or what about the simple revelation found in Mark 16:16, **“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”** Malachi reveals what is well known: “When it comes to the Day of Judgment there are two and only two possible destinations, hell and heaven.

What does Malachi reveal about hell? It is not a pleasant picture. He says, **“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire…not a root or a branch will be left to them.”** Clearly the message here is frightening and horrid, yet we should pay attention to what is said.

So note, the great day of judgment will be a horrible day, really a horrible existence, for those called **“arrogant and evildoers.”** Who are these people? The term **“evildoer”** is easy to pin point. The evildoer is the person who persistently, consistently and insistently turns away from the grace, mercy and power of God. The evildoer does what they want with no regard for what God says or for what God wants. The evil doer loves sin, revels in sin, and promotes sin…really he has no boundaries. In every aspect of their lives they resist, rebel and refuse to acknowledge God at any level.

The term **“arrogant”** is a bit harder to define in the English but clearly the sense of the word can be seen in the context. More important is to look at the original Hebrew word. The meaning as given in the Old Testament Theological Word Book is this, *“the basic idea is pride, a sense of self-importance, which often is exaggerated to include defiance and even rebelliousness to authority.”* Simply put, the arrogant person is one who doesn’t think they need authority or God. They think they are good enough. The arrogant person is often a religious person but it is the false religion of work righteousness. They think they meet God’s standards and perhaps even surpass them. The arrogant religious people are those who don’t see the importance in Jesus as the Savior from sin but rather view him as simply an example to follow. Yet please note there are also the arrogant who completely reject God. They consider man the authority in all things, man the tops in wisdom and knowledge. In other words, the arrogant fit with what we hear in Philippians 3:18f, **“For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.”**

To the evildoer and the arrogant God promises a just reward. They have not believed and therefore they do indeed stand condemned. Now please note, I don’t know if hell will have actual fire or not, or whether this is a completely spiritual term for the torment to come. What I do know is that the agony and horror that is hell will never end. It is not a pretty picture but it is a truthful picture that God gives. God tells us exactly what is in store for the unbeliever and he does indeed describe its horror. It is horrid enough so that I don't even like hearing about hell. So let’s you and I turn our attention to the other side of eternity, heaven.

Our text simply says, **“But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.”** Actually the key phrase about the joy of heaven is not so much in these words as they are in the next words, **“And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.”** Picture the young calf penned in the stall for a number of days and then picture the joy of that calf when finally the weather breaks and he is let out of the stall for the first time. He leaps and frolics in his new freedom. He bounds about with a joyful heart because he has been set free. So it is with us. We have been penned in the stall of sin. But when the weather turned and the sun came blazing out we were freed from that stall. Such is the joy of heaven.

There are, of course, other pictures given of the wonder of heaven. Suffice it to say that heaven is a place of paradise, a place where all the bad and negative things of this world are gone and there is found only what is best and good. More so, what is found is perfect and holy. What is found is the complete healing of the Lord. No longer will sin plague us. No longer will there be pain or hurt, anger or disappointment, grief and death. There will be only the complete joy of God’s love in our lives. A joy described as golden cities, rivers of living water and a place with a total absence of anything dark. As I like to say to people, “When you get to heaven it will be far greater, far more wonderful than you could ever imagine or dream!”

Such a contrast this picture of heaven and hell. Heaven filled with joy unbounded and hell shivering with horror. Such is what God tells us is waiting the souls of men. What we want to consider is how do we avoid the horror of hell and get to the eternal bliss of heaven?

I ask that question in all earnestness. Seriously, what is the difference between the believer and the unbeliever? Can you truly say that the believer has less sin in this world or has done less evil? Can you look at a person’s life and judge whether they are worthy of heaven or hell? I will tell you that you cannot judge based on what you see in this life, because you cannot see the thing that makes the real difference. God’s Word declares of all mankind: **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** And again God’s Word says, **“There is no one righteous, not even one, there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.”** If we look at mankind and seek the answer in what we can do, then we are all lost. The difference between the believer and the unbeliever is not in degree of sin or any other notion. Again, if we look for the solution in ourselves we will be lost, we will be the arrogant.

What is the difference then? The first and foremost phrase to understand here is who this is speaking to. It is for those **“who revere God’s name.”** What does that mean? It means to hold in reverence and awe that which is of and from God. Is it revering God’s name to ignore his Word? Is it holding God in awe when we determine that we have more right to determine what is good and moral than God does? To revere his name is to be a believer. To trust, to believe, to hear and follow Him to the best of our calling. And remember God’s name is everything God calls himself in his Word and it is also everything that God has revealed about Himself in the Word. So this phrase especially means to put your faith and life into the hands of the Living God, by faith in Jesus, the very fullness and revelation of God!

The difference between heaven and hell is the Son. Our passage spoke this way, **“the Sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.”** To grasp the real intent and full revelation of those words then contemplate what is said in Luke, the Song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. He said, **“To give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”** Zechariah was speaking of John’s mission in revealing Jesus and his salvation. And why do you think the very Transfiguration of Jesus is recorded as: **“His face shone like the sun..”** The sun spoken of in our text is none other than Jesus Christ our God and Lord. None other than the Messiah that God had promised, the Messiah who would take away the sins of the world and bring eternal peace to mankind.

Yes, Jesus is the difference. Jesus, the Living Word of God. He is the one, the only one who will make a difference in our eternal destination. He is our Savior from sin. He is the one who brings the righteousness that God demands as the entrance fee to heaven. Jesus is the one who has done it all and paid for it all and therefore Jesus is the only one that counts.

Did you note that wonderful fact in our reading? Note how the Sun of righteousness is something that happens in our lives. He rises. He heals. So it is clearly shown that salvation is in the life of Jesus. He came to be our Savior. He came to give forgiveness and eternal life. The healing Jesus brings us the eternal healing of sin forgiven and trespasses not counted against us. Jesus restores the relationship between God and man. And though the price for heaven still remains perfect righteousness, Jesus puts his righteousness on us, he clothes us with his forgiveness and his perfection and God seeing his Son in us opens wide the portals of eternity.

It is done, all done in Jesus. Jesus rises in our lives and lets his love shine on us. How horrid that people insist in using sunscreen against Jesus. How sad that the world prefers the shadows and places of darkness to lurk. How revealing when those who call themselves the children of God are always found wearing their sunglasses so they can be cool in the world! Get the picture? It is the man who rejects and casts off Jesus who ends up in hell. God has given us Jesus, yes, faith and trust in Jesus as the free and certain path to his eternal kingdom.

Dear people, the Day is coming. I don’t know when it will be here. What I do know is that I will be ready in Jesus. I will put my faith and confidence in Jesus. I will rely on his grace and mercy for even such a sinner as I am. This is the gospel. This is the light of men for salvation. Jesus is what makes the difference and brings us His gift of life, real life, forever life. Amen.