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Malachi 3:6, English Standard Version.

⁶“For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.”

Suppose it was real.

The pandemic has had a dramatic, very real impact on the lives of many millions of people in the world, hundreds of millions, at least. We all know that an enormous number of people have died, while a possibly equal, but largely uncounted, number of people have suffered long-term, debilitating damage to their lungs, hearts, brains, and kidneys. Throughout the pandemic, you’ve heard me deliver messages and offer prayers about the high levels of anxiety in our society. This is another casualty count, like long-term physical ailments, to which our society has paid very little attention. I’ve talked about the avalanche of alcohol and drug related illnesses. I’ve talked about people plummeting into depression over lost jobs and desperation about how to feed their children. These problems are very real. One thing that nobody knows for sure is how much of the ongoing violence and in-your-face anger can be attributed to anxiety caused by the virus. In truth, there is a good argument to be made that the emotional and mental impact of the pandemic is

astonishingly enormous. One estimate says that the percentage of adults reporting anxiety or depression disorders jumped from 11% to 41 % as a result of the pandemic. Decades from now, when scholars look back at this period of American history, two things are likely to stand out: 1) in future pandemics, we need to do a much better job of managing impacts other than the ones on which our government has focused, namely deaths and ICU visits. 2) Our society, that is the American society, is in big emotional and mental health trouble if a pandemic caused by not particularly lethal virus can have such dramatic effects on society.

Our passage today comes from the Book of Malachi. Malachi is one of the twelve minor prophets of the Old Testament. Remember that the prophets were intermediaries between God and humans; God spoke through them, and often, through visions, the prophets conveyed God's unhappiness, and at other times, offered God's forgiveness. Malachi's book provides the final prophetic words in the Old Testament, as the events described in this Book also take place the latest in time. The Book of Malachi tells of a time when many Jews in Judea, which is more or less what we would today consider to be the southern part of Israel, were disillusioned with their fate and their faith. After the second Temple had been built in 515 B.C., they had expected an abundant life. Remember that their focus was on God providing them a good life on Earth, not with an afterlife. Many

Jews, even most priests, had turned away from their moral responsibilities. Malachi confronts people and calls on them to renew their commitment to God. The people turned a deaf ear to God. There were more than just moral problems. The economy had collapsed, and people were hungry. After the exile in Babylon, farms had been abandoned, and so crops were poor. We don't know who Malachi was. This wasn't even a person's name. It simply means "the Messenger", something that could describe any prophet. The name for the Book might have been taken from Malachi 3:1 - *Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.* The Book of Malachi teaches the importance of living by a strong moral code and taking part in religious practices. Malachi, because he challenged the sinful people of his day, found himself at odds with his neighbors and the leaders of the Jewish community.

In Chapter 3, where our quote comes from, Malachi is telling the disillusioned people of Israel that someday, they will realize that they should never have turned their trust away from God. It will become clear that God has never abandoned them, that God has been with them every step of the way and that they will be okay. Evil will be crushed and those who have kept their hearts open to God will be just fine. Our quote says this: *"For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed."* By the way, the children

of Jacob are the descendants of the twelve sons and one daughter of Jacob – and these are the Israelite people. Obviously, this says that God is never going to go back on God’s promise to protect and care for the Israelites. God promised land, progeny, and God’s blessing to the Israelites – and they can relax, knowing they are under the hand of God. But let’s look at our quote in the context of the verse that comes after it: ⁶ *“For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. ⁷ From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them.* This is very powerful. It says that God will stand by God’s people and God will keep the promises made to them, even though the Israelites have repeatedly broken their side of the bargain.

Recently, I got a phone call from someone at a church where I had filled in for a pastor who was on vacation. This man first apologized for calling me out of the blue, then he explained how he knew me, that he had heard a sermon of mine a long time ago, and when he found himself with a problem that he didn’t know how to deal with, he thought of me. He said that he was in desperate shape, that at the beginning of the pandemic, his wife lost her job. He had already lost his job, almost a year before the pandemic began, and after having no luck finding a job, he and his wife had decided that they could get by for a while with him staying home and taking care of their two kids. I said I was sorry, that it

must be extremely difficult for them to be without any income. He said but that's not all. His oldest kid, a young teenager, had become suicidal and had to be hospitalized. He said it had to do with the boy being isolated from his school friends and having to study at home – and being stuck with two unhappy, unemployed parents who were constantly worried about money. I said my God, you've got a lot on your shoulders. I'm glad you called me, I told him, and let's call him Jim. Jim said but that's not all. What else? I asked. He said Do you remember my wife's name? I said no, I'm sorry. He said that's okay, it's Nancy. Well, Nancy just served me with divorce papers. At that point, I asked him if there was anything else. He laughed and said no, and then he started to sob. You know that, as always, I am changing details of this story to protect Jim's privacy. I asked Jim where he was, what he was doing. He said that he was just driving around in his car, that he had pulled into a parking lot to call me. He didn't have any place to go, he said, and Jim added that he was thinking of killing himself. I won't make you wait this time to hear how this ended. I got him to drive to the ER and I met him there. He is now getting in-patient psychiatric help.

Here is something I would like all of you to think about. I wonder if the panic, the extraordinary explosion in anxiety among the American people is related to the abandonment of faith. It is at best very politically incorrect to

belong to a church, to publicly state that you are a Christian. Over the last thirty years, church membership has been dropping, and the rate has been accelerating. I don't think this comes from the heart: society has strongly urged people to leave their churches. So, it's a lot like the way the children of Jacob abandoned God. It has become too inconvenient to have faith. When things are going well, when life is good, and when society discourages faith, the price is too high for those who might otherwise believe in God. That's why there was this cycle of faith in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. God had to wait until things were very bad for the children of Jacob before they would return to him. I'm not sure if what we are currently experiencing with church attendance is cyclic or not. I think that it is, that there will be a sort of revival. But right now, most Americans do not have anything to hold onto – and so we are not prepared for a sustained emergency.

Our relationship with God does need work. It's not something you decide is important and then, boom, magically, you always turn to God when you are desperate. It's far too easy to fall into the trap of thinking of God last – or not thinking of God at all. That's what prayer is for. It's not to beg God for a bicycle for Christmas. It's not to tell God that you're sorry you yelled at your kid. Prayer is for developing your relationship with God. If you put yourself on a disciplined program of praying, then you will incrementally learn to keep God in your mind.

Praying just before going to sleep is a good way to do it, and this is why people teach kids to pray at night. The last thing we do before we go to bed often sticks with us. It twirls around in our brains as we sleep. Praying seems clumsy to some of us. It might be something that has just never clicked. Try streaming a spiritual podcast or downloading a Christian book. Listen to it on your drive to work. Listen to it instead of watching yet another Law and Order rerun. This can be your form of prayer. Another idea is to find someone with whom to talk about God. Another person in your congregation, a member of your family. One thing I did when our kids were little was read from the Bible every night. The room we did this in became known as the Bible room. It was good for them – and it was very good for me. It kept God in my mind. Then, when the poop hits the fan, God comes into your mind and you realize you are not alone, that were never alone, that you will never be alone. And very importantly, God knows that you will come and go, that you will waver in your faith, that you will make mistakes. But God will absolutely never ditch you. When you turn to God, God will be there. You will know that in the end, everything works out. You will walk in the Kingdom of God now and long past the end of time.

I spoke with Jim one more time after he had been treated as a patient in the hospital for about twenty-four hours. He was still very sad. He cried,

although he tried to hide it. I asked him if his faith was helping at all. I asked him if he realized that God is going to be with him, that God will walk with him through every step of what he was going to go through. He nodded, then he told me that in fact, he had talked to his son that morning. His son, you might remember, was being treated for depression himself. When he told his son that he loved him, the boy repeated back something that this man had taught his son several years before. The boy told his dad that he shouldn't worry, that both of them would be okay – that God would take care of them. It can pay off in very selfish ways to teach your kids about faith. Please pray with me.

God, as terrible as this pandemic was, we know that this wasn't the real one, that as pandemics go, this was one was mild. The disease could have been radically more deadly. We could have failed at creating a vaccine. God, when the real one comes, please let us be better prepared to put our trust in you and to be confident that you will walk with us every step of the way. Let us begin, God, not by being paranoid that a much more dangerous pandemic could be around the corner, but rather, by simply doing what your people have always done. Let us walk with you ever day and every night. Let us never stray from your side. Let us always confront what we must confront, but may we always hand off our anxiety, anger, and fear to you. Then, we know that we will be prepared. Amen.