

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 the temple. Indeed, the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of that coming, and who can stand when such a messenger appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap;
and will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver,
and will purify the descendants of Levi
and refine them like gold and silver,
until they present offerings to the Lord God 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.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, in this holy time of awe and fear, as we prepare to welcome you again we remember your trust in us shown when you folded divinity into the helpless body of a human child. O God, in this holy time of awe and fear when we are surrounded by signs of the pain and travail of all creation, we cling to the comfort and wisdom you offered us in the person of Jesus.

O God of redemption, grant us the knowledge of your presence with us in this sacred time. Awaken us to your confidence that we will prepare for your coming reign not only by watching and waiting, but by using our wisdom to witness and our love to bring justice and comfort. Although we, too, are fragile and vulnerable; although our strength is limited and our sight is only partial, your presence with us in our fear and in our hope, empowers us. Your presence with us raises us to faithfulness and courage in the deep assurance that when your glory comes, all that is limited and partial will pass away and all creation will rejoice before you. Amen.

SERMON

Text: For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; and will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.

As most of you know, the church year actually begins with Advent—the period of time just before Christmas. Count back four Sundays from Christmas day and you have the first Sunday of Advent, and the beginning of the church year. Advent's purpose is to prepare us for the coming of Christ: not just to remember Christ's birth in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, but to look ahead to Christ's coming at the end of chronological time—to look ahead to the completion of the work and purpose of the Church. Advent is a paradoxical time, a period of active waiting for the One who has come and who is yet to come. Advent reminds us to open our hearts: to empty them of the clutter, and to prepare room for Christ to enter.

This choice to make Advent the beginning of the church year is quite deliberate. The rhythm of the liturgical calendar, which took centuries to develop and refine, is carefully designed to deepen our spiritual lives and to invite us into fellowship with God and one another. In fact, the seasons of the liturgical year are in and of themselves understood to be spiritual exercises; they are religious disciplines carefully and artfully crafted over centuries to help us grow into the image of God, to be reflections of divine love. This is an important point. Liturgy is designed with God in mind; it is designed to keep the spiritual life before our eyes so we may continue the joyful but at times difficult work of being transformed into the image of love. Advent is a marvelous example of this: it is designed to help us remember a very important part of the spiritual life, namely, *hurry up and wait*.

I am actually serious about this. Psychologists have long noted that one of the marks of an emotionally mature person is the ability to live with "delayed gratification." In some startling, long-term studies, beginning with pre-school children and following them into adulthood, those who as children could delay their gratification for something they desired were as adults universally happier, better adjusted, performing better in school and experiencing significantly higher satisfaction in life and relationships than those people who as children did not exhibit the ability to wait for gratification. Curiously, the Church has been promoting "delayed gratification" for centuries in its Advent liturgies, but doing so with a twist. We are reminded every year at this time that what we long for is already here and yet not here; that the kingdom we work for is present and still to come; that Christ's advent was achieved and is yet to be. *We are actively waiting for what has already happened: the coming of the Christ*. Advent is designed to put us into that paradoxical place of active waiting, that place of patient impatience. Impatient for Christmas, we must patiently wait for it.

As we mature spiritually we begin to understand one of the important pieces of this preparation—the soul's need to divest itself of its illusions: to let go of self-righteous conceits, to burn away the dross that is caked to our lives, to cleanse ourselves of impurity and to move beyond the simple practice of religion to an actual relationship with the Spirit. This is not easy. It takes hard work and dedication and disciplined practice. Religion from the neck up is one thing; religion from the heart in is another thing entirely.

This is what lies behind this morning's lesson from the book of Malachi. In that passage we heard, "**And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to the temple. For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap.**" These images—the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap—are images that the hearers in Malachi's day would have understood; they knew what was involved in each process. In the process for purifying silver a silversmith must hold the silver to be purified over the hottest part of the flame so as to burn away all the impurities. Only intense heat will do this. But there is a warning and a trick the silversmith must follow. First the warning: the silver cannot be left too long in the flame; if it stays too long it is destroyed. And that leads to the trick: the smith must remove the silver at just the right moment. And what is that moment? It suddenly turns so pure it is like a mirror. It is ready when the smith can see her reflection in it, when she can see her own image. When we are purified God will see God's own reflection, God's own image, in each of our souls.

Then there is fuller's soap. A fuller, as you may know, cleaned and prepared fleece for weaving. When you shear a sheep you get wool, but freshly shorn wool is dirty and oily and, well, smelly; sheep are not overly fastidious with their appearance the way cats are. A fuller takes that dirty, oily, smelly fleece and prepares it for spinning. It is not a gentle process. First it is boiled in water to try and loosen up the caked on filth. Then it is scrubbed with a very caustic soap: fuller's soap. Then it is often beaten with rocks to soften it and to continue the process of removing the muck. Then it is spun into thread and often the process is then repeated so that the thread can be woven that much more tightly and the garment will be that much nicer and cleaner and smell a lot less like sheep (this is a real plus, let me tell you). Soul cleansing with fuller's soap.

So what does it mean to purify the soul, to subject our heart to fuller's soap? As I prayed about this it was a very unpleasant experience. I imagined the white hot heat searing into my soul and burning away all my issues, all the crud I still hold onto like a security blanket, what I learned to hold onto to fight against injustices and hurts. I know it sounds strange, but I did not know if I wanted to be burned clean. And then the thought of the fuller's soap made me think of my mother washing my mouth out with soap when I was a kid. That was not pleasant either.

I had to walk away from this. My prayers were getting me nowhere. I knew there was another path, one that was life giving and that would allow me to see this passage with new eyes, hear it with new ears and understand it with a new heart, and turn to be healed; but for the life of me I could not grasp it.

And then my mind flew some hours later to the memory of my wife giving birth to our daughter. I remember Philippa being born and Andrea being radiant, simply radiant in the midst of all that pain. All she had been through, not just with labor, but with the all sacrifices she made during the pregnancy, and all the determination she exhibited in order to face into her own stuff so she could be an emotionally healthy mother, all of this was exploding all around me: this was the searing beauty of the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap; it was the expression of love in the creation of life. Suddenly I got this teeniest of glimpse of God birthing life, a glimpse that a mother can see far more fully than I, a glimpse of the loving act of creation and how it purifies and opens a path to health and holiness. The refiner's fire is the creator's act of love and I could only gasp at this realization.

Wendy Wright, in her article, *Wreathed in Flesh and Warm*, writes, "There is a quality, a texture to the waiting we do during pregnancy that is one only with the waiting we do for God. God became human in the person of Jesus through the person of Mary, through this woman's willingness to open herself, soul and body, to the divine seed that soon would flower for the redemption of the world. It was in her pregnant womb that heaven and earth were so lovingly intermingled, through the waiting experienced in her flesh and blood that God was made to walk with humankind."¹

With a bible that is so rich in male imagery Wright reminds us of God's feminine essence, of God's fecund love. As a man, I cannot look upon my own daughter and wife, but with wonder.

¹ Weavings: Vol II, No. I; January/February 1987; Upper Room; Nashville, TN; page 18.

I can only attempt spiritually what for me is impossible physically: birthing the divine seed, finding a womb inside me where heaven and earth can lovingly intermingle . . . and wait: actively, purifyingly, lovingly . . . wait.

In this Advent time of active lingering and unborn questions, we engage in the discipline of living in both Kronos and Kairos—in both chronological time and God's eternal moment, living in the present a future reality that already happened in the past: living individual lives that are being birthed while already having been born, participating in a church at the advent of its creation as it yet already exists, and of preparing, waiting, for our God who is being birthed in our midst and yet whose already-birth refines, cleanses and shapes our lives with purpose and direction.

It really does require a cleansing of heart and a refining of soul. Yet each of us here, birthed in love from our mothers' wombs, is living witness that this cleansing is God's loving act of creation. Amen.