

# Prepare the Way

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Malachi 3:1–4

**3** See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>2</sup> But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; <sup>3</sup> he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>4</sup> Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

As I prepared this sermon, I had received sad news. On Sunday we had cried with a church member who lost her brother to substance abuse. We had just heard that a long-time member of the congregation who moved to Alabama to be near relatives had passed on Thanksgiving day. My husband's dear friend lost her husband that same day. Then we heard of a young woman who I taught in Sunday School had lost her husband. A lady that I worked with for 30 years died on Monday. Then we heard of the senseless death of four students and the wounding of 7 others in a shooting at Oxford High School, near where we all live. And today I heard that a former church member lost her grandson in a shooting in her driveway. Added to all this, our prayer lists grow longer and longer of those who are suffering with traumatic illnesses and long-term pain. The questions abound...Lord, how long will we experience the pain and suffering, grief of loss, and the pain of violent acts against the innocent? Where is justice and judgement?

As painful as this week was, there is a word from the Lord. The word of the Lord came to Malachi as a word of promise. That promise comes as good news to us; but there is also at least a degree of uneasiness in the promise. There are some elements of the promise that we would love to have fulfilled and other elements that we would just as soon leave unfulfilled.

This blend of joy and apprehension at the prospect of promise fulfillment is most clearly reflected in: “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap.” As Christians we respond to this promise by wondering exactly what is meant by the refining. What exactly in my life is in need of refining? And how much will it hurt? What might I have to give up (or what might be taken from me) before I would be refined like gold and silver?

Malachi was speaking to a community of Jews who had returned to Judah. In response to complaints that God has failed to exercise divine judgment, the prophet delivers a rebuttal concerning divine judgment, the Day of the Lord, the character of God’s justice, and the purification of the people. First he had some questions for his day. How has God loved us? (1:2) “Has not one God created us?” (2:10) “Where is the God of justice?” (2:17) How shall we return to God? (3:7)

The people, newly restored in Judah, experiencing the challenges of being human, are skeptical of God’s justice, because their practices of piety have yielded neither divine retributive judgment against “evildoers” nor prosperity for the restoration community. Their challenges to the prophet smack of self-righteousness, and they seemingly have failed to notice that their compromised worship practices, marital infidelity, and social injustice dishonor God. They seek and desire the coming of the Lord, imagining that it will be favorable for them. The prophet, however, reminds the people that the arrival of divine judgment rarely meets human expectations—it is sudden, surprising, and often as much a judgment against the ones yearning for it as it is a judgment against their enemies (Amos 5:18). When the Day of the Lord arrives, the prophet warns, all will be found guilty and all will be deserving of punishment. In particular, the prophet warns that God’s swift judgment will be executed upon the perpetrators of social injustice.

God's judgment should not, however, be understood as solely punitive, even though the people seem to deserve punishment. God's justice is not the justice expected by the restoration community. Instead, we find that the divine judgment to be exercised on the Day of the Lord will issue in a process of purification that makes a place hospitable for the abiding presence of God. In the end, God's plan of justice is restorative rather than punitive.

Malachi has some good questions for our day. "Who can endure the day of his coming?" (3:2) Who will be "pure and blameless" in the day of Christ? (Phil. 1:10) Who will prepare the way by repentance and forgiveness? (Luke 3:1–6) Advent questions! Advent questions our worthiness, readiness, and willingness for Christ's coming. We are called to new "integrity and uprightness," a turning "from iniquity," and a renewed "reverence" for God's "covenant of life and well-being" with us (Mal. 2:5–6). Like the ancient priesthood, the contemporary priesthood of believers opens its life to the refining presence of God and offers its life in righteous practice.

A faithful hearing of this text evokes us to ask some good questions about our worship life during Advent: Are our prayers prophetic as well as personal, directed to injustice and corruption as well as seasonal anxiety and individual omissions? A prayer of confession for Advent admits, "We live casual lives, ignoring your promised judgment. We accept lies as truth, exploit neighbors, abuse the earth, and refuse your justice and peace." A prayer for the Second Sunday of Advent addresses the God of mercy: "You sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation. Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins."

To accomplish this plan, God will purify God's people. First the prophet points to the coming of a messenger who would clear or "prepare the way of the Lord." Then the prophet describes the Lord's coming as like the refiner's fire, whose purpose is to remove impurities and strengthen the substance being refined. John Calvin wrote this

about the refiner's fire: "The power of the fire, we know, is twofold: for it burns and it purifies; it burns what is corrupt; but it purifies gold and silver from their dross."

The question for each of us is: What is it that stands in need of purification? And what will be consumed by flames in the process? After purification, what is it that God reckons as precious metal?

Purification has another purpose, in addition to the removal of impurities. When silver is refined, it is treated with carbon or charcoal, preventing the absorption of oxygen and resulting in its sheen and purity. One writer has suggested that a silversmith knows that the refining process is complete only when she observes her "own image reflected in the mirror-like surface of the metal." If this is the case, does the prophet also suggest that the image of God is restored in this process? Is humanity deemed good and righteous when once again the divine image is reflected in the human heart? Jennifer Ryan Ayres.

Do hymns and music express the messenger's judgment as well as the joy? While we are eager to sing and hear the familiar Christmas carols, Advent hymn themes are unsung, and unpopular. The notes of today's scripture are sounded in hymns like "O Day of God, Draw Near," which sings of judgment and faithfulness, justice and security.

Our scripture also appears in one of the signature choral works of this season, George Frideric Handel's Messiah. Music can sing the Word and proclaim the good news.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, music can sing the Word, proclaim the good news, and challenge all of us. After the first presentation of Messiah in London in 1741, Handel wrote to a friend: "I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wished to make them better." The composer challenges us to go beyond feeling good to doing good. At issue are some good questions about worship in our day: Entertainment or instruction? Diversion or direction? Amusement or awareness? Handel himself provided an answer.

Although by 1751 he was blind, until his death he conducted Messiah as an annual benefit for the Foundling Hospital in London, which served mostly widows and orphans of the clergy. The intent was not just to entertain; Handel's hope was to make them just and better. His ear was open to the prophetic word: "Present offerings to the Lord in righteousness" (Mal. 3:3). **Deborah A. Block**

In many ways, our response to this text is probably not that much different from the response of Malachi's original audience. Like them, we want to stand and see that day. We want our offerings to be pleasing to the Lord. We want to see the restoration of the covenant. We want to see things made right, the way God intended—and yet ... and yet we are not so sure. We do not want to go through too much change or pain to see it happen.

We experience the tension between joy and apprehension. When I was pregnant with my first child I read a book about the birthing process, and I will be honest, it frightened me! I was excited to become a mother, but the description of the process was not one I was looking forward to. I imagined the joy of loving and raising the child, but it sounded like I would die in the process. One of the ways I endured was to look around at the then 7 billion people in the world and say they made it without dying, so there was hope for me that I could also give birth. As we try to hear this promise anew and to reflect on our relationship, know that God's promise is that he will prepare us. Like the anticipation of a couple expecting a child, we can reflect socially and culturally on what might really be changed when God's promised messenger of the covenant does come.

Whether you are the one carrying the child or waiting anxiously for that call that the baby you are adopting has been born or awaiting the agency calling to say they have located a child for you, the anticipation is one we remember. Giving birth or adopting, that major events in life often come with very mixed emotions and mixed feelings. Even

in the midst of joy at the prospect of this new life, this new person to love, there is often fear about the unknowns involved.

For us as a congregation and our broader society, what might be refined and purified in God's promised refining fire? When God's promise, spoken through Malachi, is finally fulfilled, what will look different in our church? our world? our lives? Will we respect life as much as we respect property? Will we find ways to live in harmony, rather than running away from each other? Will we find peaceful ways of resolving our differences rather than hate speech or gun violence. Will we work together and no one demand their rights? Will giving Tuesday be as important as Black Friday? Will we find joy in our relationship with God and each other? Will we have hope? Will we have peace? Remember, we are the ones who are going to be refined. We are the ones in need of refining.

Look inside. Look inside yourself. Look inside our church. What will God's refining look like? Perhaps the faces in our pews will reflect the rainbow of pigmentation and ages in God's world more than they do. Perhaps we will find ways to help people improve their skills and earn living wages. What will our worship and our stewardship look like if "the offering of Judah and Jerusalem [and Flint and Detroit and Swartz Creek and Flushing and Saginaw and Burton and Mount Morris] will be pleasing to the Lord" (v. 4)? These would be worthwhile questions to ponder this week.

God has promised to visit us, to restore us, to refine us. It will happen, and it will happen under God's control and in God's time. The refining is not waiting for us to feel good about it. God's promise is sure, and it is good news. We will be re-formed in God's image, and it will be good. No matter how we feel about it now. No matter what we may be afraid of now. When we are refined and purified as God promises, it will be good, and we will be prepared to receive God's messenger. **Seth Moland-Kovash**

Malachi 3:1-4 - In Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, 1:26-31. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.