

The Messenger of the Covenant

Malachi 3:1-4

It's the second Sunday of Advent and still no jingle bells or decorated sidewalks. Instead we get a message from Malachi. Most scholars agree that this minor prophet was speaking to a postexilic community of Jews who had returned to Judah. Much of the book is written as a series of *disputations*, and the prophet serves as an arbiter in these conflicts between men and God. The people, newly restored in Judah, 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. They believe there is no problem with their compromised worship practices, marital infidelity, and social injustice which 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.

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, the divine judgment to be exercised on the Day of the Lord will usher in a process of purification that makes a place hospitable for the abiding presence of God. In the end, God's schema of justice is restorative rather than retributive.

First God will send the messenger to prepare the way. In verses 2-3, 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."

We must answer: 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? Calvin thought that the refiner's fire would serve to correct the corruption not only of the people, but of the Levitical priests also: "Such then was the contagion, that not only the common people became corrupt, but even the Levites themselves, who ought to have been guides to others, and who were to be in the Church as it were the pattern of holiness. God however promises that such would be the purifying which Christ would effect, and so regulated, that it would consume the whole people, and yet purify the elect, and purify them like silver, that they may be saved."

Purification has another possible purpose, as well, 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 *imago Dei* 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**)

Malachi had some good 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) Malachi has some good questions for our day. His very use of questions as a means of prophetic revelation counters the unthinking certitude of much so-called religious conviction. "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. "The descendants of Levi" 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 will turn the church to some good questions about its worship life during Advent: Are 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." (Deborah A. Block)

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 verse 2: "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." The believer responds 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?

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.

This week I had three experiences that brought this home for me. This week, Kate Middleton, duchess of Cambridge announced her pregnancy, before she had hoped since she has not finished her first trimester. On last Sunday I participated in a pastor's installation worship and spoke to a friend and colleague whose only son is a junior. One of my staff came to talk with me about some medical problems. In each case there are unknown outcomes. And I just thought of a third where a colleague in Grand Rapids was diagnosed with cancer. Each situation brought joy and apprehension. As we try to hear this promise anew and to reflect on our relationship to it. How do we respond socially and culturally on what might really be changed when God's promised messenger of the covenant does come.

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.

We can also take an honest reflection on our church 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? This is not about telling God to do with our enemies and those we don't like, but how is God calling us to be, *we* are the ones who are going to be refined. *We* are the ones in need of refining.

As we look inside. Look inside yourself. Look inside our congregation. Look inside your church. What will God's refining look like? Perhaps the faces in our pews will reflect the rainbow of pigmentation in God's world more than they do. Perhaps there will be fewer luxury cars in the church parking lot and more beds for the homeless. What will our worship and our stewardship look like if "the offering of Judah and Jerusalem and Flint and Swartz Creek and Fenton and Grand Blanc and the Disciples of Christ will be pleasing to the LORD" (v. 4)? These would be worthwhile questions for us to ponder.

As we close I assure you that the promise of this restoration and refining is sure. 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. **(Seth Moland-Kovash)**

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