

Malachi 3:1-7b

2 Advent C + December 9, 2009
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Word of the Lord from Malachi 3: “²But 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. ³He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Malachi is the final book in the Old Testament, so our text declares some of the Lord's last words before 500 or so years of silence. The Lord had brought His people back from their captivity in Babylon, as promised. They'd rebuilt the temple and the city wall under His protection. Things were better than they used to be, but they still weren't perfect. Old sins are hard to give up, easy to return to, and our text mentions sorcery, adultery, lies, oppression and contempt for the Lord. So in the book of Malachi, the Lord registered His complaint against His people for their sinfulness; and in particular, He notes the unrighteousness of the Levites—the priests whom He had designated to stand between Him and His people. The priests were far from righteous, and His people needed a better Priest than that.

As He had kept His promises thus far, the Lord continued to keep His promise of salvation. Just a chapter and a half before the end of the Old Testament, just before several centuries of silence, the Lord promised, “Behold, I send My messenger and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, He is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”

There's a lot to that promise, and let's touch on a key point. God promised to send a messenger, a herald. This is what kings did in the old days, sending a messenger ahead to prepare the way before the king himself came. That's a startling thing: in this promise of the coming Savior, the Lord made clear that the Savior would not be just another man—it would be the Lord Himself. “My messenger...will prepare the way before Me,” He said, adding that “The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple.” Can't get much clearer than that: the Lord Himself was on the way.

But. The promise was followed by a “but:” “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. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings of righteousness to the LORD.”

On the face of it, the “but” was an intimidating one. A refiner's fire is terribly hot: hot enough to melt the gold and silver mixed in with the dirt and other impurities. As the precious metal melted, it sank while the impurities floated to the surface to be whisked away, leaving only pure metal behind. Fuller's soap is not exactly marketed among the moisturizers at the cosmetics counter: the principal ingredient is lye, a chemical that's good at extracting tough stains from garments—and also burning the skin. The Lord declared that He was coming. He was coming as the refiner and as the fire, as the fuller and as the soap. He was coming to make clean, to purify; and His comparisons made it sound painful.

Good news or bad news? Deliverance or threat? At first blush, my sin-afflicted flesh reacts very poorly. It sounds as if the Lord was saying, "You've got sinful stains and impurities that need getting rid of, so I'll burn them away by fire and lye." It sounds as if righteousness would come through some serious suffering.

But there's another element not to be overlooked: in our sinful condition, there's no gold or white garment to be found. There's only impurity and stain. We might add a third simile to the two in the text: we're like a rotten apple. If an apple has some rot to it, you can cut the corrupted parts away and make use of what is left; but if an apple is rotten to the core, there's nothing left to salvage. Back in the Garden of Eden, God created Adam and Eve to be good apples; but because of their sin, apart from Christ we're rotten to the core. We're all dirt, no gold. We're a stain without a white garment; and where Isaiah 64:6 calls our own righteousness "filthy rags," think of clothing so threadbare that the dirt is holding it together.

So our sinful flesh would have us hear this as a threat, a promise of salvation that ends with no hope. It would have us hear God saying, "You've got a lot of impurity to you, so I'm going to turn up the fire and burn it all away. If there's anything left, then what's left of you is pure before Me. I'm going to scrub out the stain with lye; and if there's anything left of you, then what's left of you is clean before Me." But apart from Christ, there is no purity or righteousness to be found. There would be nothing left.

But the promise is no threat: the Lord declared that after He purified the sons of Levi, they would "bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD." There would be something left of them. In fact, righteous and free from all impurity, they would be more than they were before. How could this be?

It could be because the Lord wasn't coming only to refine and purify, to be the fire and the lye. He was also coming to be the One who would face the fire and take the heat. He would proclaim in Luke 12, "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:49-50). The One who came with just fire came also to be baptized with it for you.

This fire burned on Calvary. From His baptism in the Jordan, the sinless Son of God bore your sins all the way to the cross. There, in the words of 2 Corinthians 5:21, God "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." By His suffering and death, Jesus endured the refining fire of condemnation for sin; and because of His sacrifice, that sin with its stain and impurities is gone. Jesus faced the fire and the lye, the refining and the judgment for you on the cross. He rose again three days later—no longer with your load of sin, for that was removed at the cross. Risen, He is the pure and righteous Son of God who comes to give you His purity and righteousness.

And how is this purity and righteousness given to you? You started out as all impurity and stain—how does this transformation take place? The answer is in our Gospel lesson for this day, for there the messenger who goes before the Lord—the one prophesied in our text—is doing the job of preparing the way. He is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance is part of the refining process, and repentance is the work of the Holy Spirit within you. Repentance is to say, "I am impure and unclean: I am sinful. I acknowledge my impure and unclean thoughts, words and deeds for the sins that they are—sins against the Lord. There is nothing good in me." This is a proper confession, because it is true—and it is an acknowledgement that you need deliverance. But this

contrition by itself is not enough to save you: saying you're dirt and stain only acknowledges the problem. It doesn't clean you up. However, godly repentance doesn't end with sorrow: it also includes faith in Jesus Christ. It leads to the forgiveness of sins, for this is true: the Lord bore all your dirt and impurities, your sin and your stain, to the cross. He suffered hell for it there. Now He is risen from the dead, with righteousness and healing—righteousness and healing that He gives to you freely. By the waters of Holy Baptism, He declares, "I didn't just clean up the old, sinful you—that would be like trying to cut out the rot from an apple corrupted to the core. In Holy Baptism, you *died* with Me. You were joined to My cross, My fire and lye. The old, rotten you was done away with. You were also joined to My resurrection—I have given you new, eternal life in Me. Where you were impurity, I have made you pure and precious, for I give you My purity and holiness. Where you were once stained and threadbare filthy rags, I have clothed you in My righteousness.

As Galatians 3:27 says, all who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Jesus suffered the refiner's fire for you, and now gives you His purity with the forgiveness of sins.

So now you are the Lord's, a member of His royal priesthood, a people belonging to God. That is what the Lord in His Gospel does for you.

There are, then, a couple of important notes about your life as one refined and redeemed.

The first is that the process of refinement continues. Gold can get dirty, even mixed in with impurities again; and white garments have an uncanny way of getting dirty in this world. Daily, you're still tempted by the impurities of sin, and daily you'll be stained again. Take heed when the Lord declares His judgment of sorcerers, adulterers, liars and oppressors. You may not have a sorcerer's hat and staff in your closet; but at its root, sorcery is an attempt to get things to work differently than God ordered them to go, to try to force God or supernatural powers to do what you want. Have you ever wished or demanded that the Lord do things your way? Approve of your sin? Give you more than He has or take trouble away on your schedule? Such sins are not far from sorcery. Adultery is one form of sexual impurity, but there are many other forms as well in thought, word and deed. As for lies, whoever among us says he tells no falsehood would be guilty right there. And as for oppressing others, our selfish nature is never far away as we look out for ourselves at the expense of those around us.

These sins do not bead up and roll off of the new you: some believe that it is this way, that they can keep on sinning and remain pure before God. But these sins dirty and stain you, seeking to get you to dump the robe of righteousness and sink you into impurity again.

Thus the refinement continues. By His Law and by suffering He permits according to His will, the Lord convicts of your sin. He moves you to repentance. By His Gospel, He pronounces you righteous, pure and unstained again. This is refinement, but refinement you can endure by His grace. You're now His redeemed child, holy in Christ even as this sin clings to you. For now, you're both saint and sinner. When the Lord refines you, this fire both destroys and purifies. It gets rid of the sins and impurities that would make you impure, and it restores you to the righteousness and purity that Christ has won for you.

This ongoing refinement explains your life as a Christian, a life of daily contrition and repentance. This is a daily renewal of your baptism. There, the Lord joined you to His death and resurrection. Now, as the Holy Spirit works repentance, He keeps you joined to Christ. He keeps your garments bright white and unstained. He keeps you precious and pure before the Lord. Because of this forgiveness, the devil has nothing to hold onto and must flee. He needs the caked-on filth as his foothold

if he is to do you harm, but this daily renewal of your baptism drowns your Old Adam again and washes the devil away. Thus a new you arises who will live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

The Lord came to refine with fire, to suffer the refiner's fire in your stead on the cross. Now, He comes to you by His means of grace to maintain you righteous and pure before Him. He declares that He is coming back to judge the sinner on the Last Day, a day of wrath indeed.

But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?

You can, in Christ. Because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen