

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Love at Home

Sermon Reflection Notes

In the season of Advent, we are spending time with Malachi, a book about holiness. Malachi is not a prophet's name but a nickname meaning "My Messenger" or "My Angel." The original context of Malachi begins some 500 years before the birth of Jesus; the people of Judah have returned home after being exiled by the Babylonians. Initially their homecoming was filled with hope, wonder, and joy. They built a beautiful temple; the glory of Jerusalem was being restored. But by the time the book of Malachi was written, the hope, wonder, and joy had given way to wayward worshippers and lethargic priests. The people were going through the motions of religion without care for the outcasts or downtrodden. They were indifferent to God's will. They were apathetic to their call to be children of God.

The people of Malachi's time sound and look a lot like the people John Wesley observed as he founded his 'methodist club' at Oxford University. And they might sound and look a lot like us, if we are honest. God's response to the apathy of the people of Judea is not to smite them, not to scold, not to flood the earth and start over. Instead, God's response is to give the people...God.

It sounds great—God coming to clean things up—until we read and really think about the rest of the scripture. We like to think about God descending on a nice, fluffy cloud or even being born as a sweet, innocent baby. But that's not what Malachi says at all. Malachi says God is a refining fire, come to purify, scrub, burn, restore. That sounds more painful, painful enough that Malachi asks: "Who can endure the day of his coming?" Endure...that's a different image than fluffy clouds and sweet-smelling babies.

The refining process, the smelting process, is difficult and dangerous. It involves fire, temperatures of 1800+ degrees, separating the dross from the pure metals. It takes time, a long time, as all the impurities must be removed. But what is left is precious, silver and gold that shines and reflects beauty into the world.

C.S. Lewis imagined a conversation at the gates of heaven where God points out that despite our smelly breath and muddy, slime covered clothing, no one will belittle us; we will be welcomed into the joy just as we are. And, Lewis imagines, our response should be: "With submission...I'd rather be cleaned first....Even though [it may hurt.]"

We sing about this: 'and fit us for heaven to live with thee there' from *Away in a Manger* or 'pure and spotless let us be' in *Love Divine, All Love's Excelling*. We want to "come home" for Christmas. We want to be home at Manchester UMC, we want to invite others to come and find a home at Manchester UMC, and we want to pray that God will come home for Christmas because God's home is with us.

It took 500 something years after Malachi delivered the message for Jesus to arrive, but he did come to the temple and he was the temple. The presence of God was in the person of Jesus. The Gospel lesson reminds us of this. John the Baptist was the Malachi of the time, proclaiming "Repent and be baptized!" He was preparing the way for Jesus to change the world. It always bears repeating that repentance is not about remorse for something we did

wrong. Repenting is not about feeling guilty. It literally means to turn around. It means to turn away from something, to embrace something new. It's purification. It's holiness.

The story of Advent is that we don't clean ourselves. Only God can do that. And we aren't left alone in the refiner's fire; rather, God is there, intimately involved in the whole process. The purification process is complete only when the refiner observes his or her own image reflected in the mirror-like surface of the metal. The purification process will reveal the image of God that we all bear, shining for all to see. And while it may not always be a comfortable transformation, in the end we will be God's precious metal—all that will remain is love.

Scripture

Malachi 3: 1-4 (NRSVUE)

¹ 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. 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 washers' soap; ³ 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. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3: 1-6

³ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Discussion Questions

1. Both Malachi and John Wesley recognized "what time it was" in the synagogue/church. What did they observe and recognize in the leadership and practices of the church?
2. How does it feel to be in worship at Manchester UMC these days? "What time is it" at Manchester UMC? Why?
3. What did we learn about the purification process involved in refining precious metals? What images struck you? Why?

4. What may scare us about being “refined?” Why?
5. When we look at the imagery in the scripture passages this week, we are looking at a lot of work, a lot of physical labor: refiner’s fire, washers’ soap, straightening paths, filling valleys, making mountains and hills low, rough ways smooth. What’s the point? Why use these images as we approach Christmas, as we wait for the coming of Jesus?
6. Ron said this week: “The story of Advent is that we don’t clean ourselves. Only God can do that.” Discuss what that means.

Closing Prayer

We walk into the season of Advent, tethered to our unresolved issues of yesterday and worn down by our fears for tomorrow. Our todays are filled to the brim, and we sometimes just want to stop and rest.

O God, in our anxiety and weariness, it is sometimes hard to believe that we are precious to you. That we are your treasures of silver and gold. You call us beloved daughters and sons, made in your image. Your love for us is steadfast and sure.

Help us to learn the lessons of your purifying fire. Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us, that we might be a people who offer lives of love, kindness, mercy, and justice in service to you and to our neighbors. We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ among us. Amen.

“Shine with the image of God. Shine like Love.”