

Purifying Fire and Soap as Good News
Malachi 3:1-4 2021

Malachi 3:1-4 (New Revised Standard Version)

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. 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 descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord 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.

I don't think there is anything more satisfying & significant in life
than when someone begins to grasp the depth of God's love for them
and the Lord's delight in their created and gifted uniqueness...
... and when they catch fire with passion, commitment and enthusiasm,
with a faith inspired and burning with joy, hope and excitement.

But the sad and unfortunate truth is that too often
that initial commitment can fade with time, distraction & adversity,
their passion, their sense of joy & purpose start to grow dim
much like a flashlight when its batteries start to fail.

Now I don't think anybody intends for their faith to fade and grow dim
but that it happens quietly and gradually, almost without notice,
as we slip away, we grow weary and our faithfulness complacent.

Sometimes we slide into a comfortable rut of the routine and mundane,
and fall into a downward spiral of spiritual surrender and apathy,
rather than the gracious good and peace that God intends for us.

The prophet Malachi was living & writing during a down time in Israel.

When the people first returned from the Babylonian captivity
they started out well and were committed to being faithful to God
as they rebuilt their lives, their nation and the Temple.
But that enthusiasm and commitment to God weakened & waned over time.

Life in Israel was more difficult and disappointing than expected.
They were surrounded by more powerful enemies in opposition.
The restored Jerusalem was much smaller, far less impressive
than it had been before in the glory days, before the exile.
The rebuilt second temple had turned out a lot smaller
& less glorious than the first that Solomon had built.

Malachi was writing against their sense of spiritual defeat & apathy,
challenging those who had lost their fervor & passion for the Lord,
and had slipped away from an authentic & committed walk with God.

At the time, several false prophets were claiming that God would
send a messenger, that is, raise up a powerful political leader
who would take vengeance against all of their enemies
who would restore the former glory, prominence and power
and thereby solve all their problems and troubles.

The prophet Malachi agrees that yes,

God has promised and would be sending a messenger, vs. 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.

Yes, God is sending a messenger, but not what you're expecting,
and not a leader to solve all of your **problems of circumstance**.

God's purpose is much bigger than wealth or crushing your enemies.

God's purpose is to restore your faith and faithfulness toward
responding well to God's steadfast gracious loving kindness.

Yes, a promise that indeed God would be sending a messenger
a messenger who would **challenge faithless complacency**, vs. 2-3

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 ... and refine them ...

Malachi's message wasn't about ease & comfort, but challenge & growth
as God uses adversity, the difficulties, troubles & stress of life,
to transform us and **to nurture our healing & spiritual growth.**

'For he is like a refiner's fire':

to purify a precious metal, it is super-heated in a crucible,
hot enough to burn off the dross, to burn away the impurities,
and eliminate any contaminates polluting the silver.

For he is like fullers' soap:

which was a very strong soap that bleaches like lye,
used to remove any impurities from fabric before sewing,
it was to prepare the clothe in order for it to be useful.

These are harsh images of the coming of the Lord, refining and cleansing.

Both are symbols that point to and describe the process
that God uses **for our purification, healing & transformation.**

It is not all warm, fuzzy, sweet, easy and comfortable,
but by **both grace and tribulation**, God changes us ----

**God nurtures and transforms us from what we were
into that very best God intends for us to become.**

Though the fire and the soap would be very unpleasant to endure,
they were not intended to destroy or damage the silver and cloth.

They're to purify the metal & cloth, and so too each of us,
because we are precious and valued, **meant to be useful.**

The point was to rid them of corruption, rid of impurities and filth
so to be restored according the Master's intention and purpose,

effective and useful toward that for which they were created...

... so that they function properly and can make a difference

according to the Creator's gracious initiative and purpose,
which for us, is to be a peace with both God & neighbor,
living a righteous life in accord with God's desire.

According to both Old and New Testament writings, by definition,
"righteousness" describes when a life is lived as God intends,

in rightful relationship with God and with all of creation,
such as Adam and Eve walking with God in the garden before the fall.

And the word, "peace", also by definition,
comes as the fruit or the result of that righteous living.
Righteous means living within God's will and God's loving embrace
which produces the condition that Scripture refers to as peace,
which is God's desire for all of creation, including humankind...

... and it is by God's refining and cleansing gracious love
that righteousness and peace become a real possibility.

It's important to note that that both the refining & the cleansing
were done because the silver and the raw fabric were highly valued,
well-worth the time and effort necessary to be made useful...
... so too with us, God's love is what gives us true worth and value,
as God refines and cleanses, purifies and restores us
toward God's good purpose, desire and intention for us.

In addition and also significant,
neither the fire nor the fullers' soap were instantaneous,
but it required a long, gradual process to be completed...

... so too it is with us, that the good that God intends for us
is a life-long process of transforming us from the inside
as God's grace & love accomplishes God's purpose in us.

Also notice that it's not the silver or fabric doing the cleaning.
The message and grace that God was sending through Malachi
was not about trying harder to be clean or to scrub ourselves,
because it is God who actually accomplishes the work in us.

It is God who does the heavy lifting for us and our task, our part
is to trust and allow the Holy Spirit to work **through to completion**.

When I ran a small business with a number of retail stores,
sometimes, things would get a bit sloppy and careless,
- not quite as polite and attentive to customers as I expected
- the store itself not quite as clean and orderly as I insisted
- the fervor & effort toward excellence had somehow gotten a bit dull.

So I would call for a store meeting and bring in all the employees,
and we'd talk about our goals, purpose, how things were going,
and some necessary changes in operations and attitudes.

And those meetings always ended with a clearer sense of direction,
with that renewed motivation, things would significantly improve,
and my employees were always pleased
that we'd met to make things work better.

I believe that we all have a natural and innate desire for better,
for the quality and effectiveness of lives to make a difference.

I don't believe people really intend to get careless and ineffective,
but that it just sort of leaks & sneaks up on us quietly & gradually,
toward a downward spiral of **self-defeating complacency**.

Advent offers us a meaningful opportunity to examine and reassess
any such destructive or soul-defeating downward spiral of faith

toward complacent compromise or apathy in our spiritual lives.

Like those store meetings, it's a useful and opportune timely season
to reflect on our spiritual-health and our relationship with God,
and perhaps look for any obstacles to God's work in our lives,
all that hinders, all that pollutes and all that interferes.

Advent reminds me of when I went to visit a new mother and her baby.
Immediately, she pointed to a pump-bottle of hand cleaner,
to wash my hands before I would be ready to hold her baby.

Malachi would probably agree that we may be in need
of some refining and cleansing before the Coming,
before we will be ready to hold the baby Jesus.

And as we approach the Lord's Table, with that thought in mind,
this is not a call for overwhelming guilt, regret or shame,
as much as it should be about **grace-driven God-searching**,
a seeking for the peace that God desires to produce in our lives.

It seems to me that the task of our coming to the Lord's Table today,
is to see if there are any obstacles blocking, standing in the way,
such as any guilt or fear, self-centeredness or pride,
laziness, stubbornness or insistence to be in control,
or anything else that might be limiting or restricting our peace,
and holding us back from God's intention that we walk with him.

**It is listening attentively with humility, trust and hope
for where in my living God wants to refine, cleanse and heal
because that is truly the Good News and peace of God's grace.**

Our hope is in trusting God's promises of Jer. 29:11 and Phil. 1:6

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to **give you a future with hope.**

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you **will bring it to completion** by the day of Jesus Christ.