

## The Refiner's Fire

December 5, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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**Reading -- Malachi 3:1-4.** *Well, pay attention! I am sending my Messenger to prepare the way for me; the One you seek will suddenly come to the Temple, the Messenger of the Covenant whom you long for will come, says God. 2 But who can endure the day of that Coming? Who can stand firm when that One appears? That day will be like a refiner's fire, like a fuller's soap. 3 The One will preside as refiner and purifier, purifying the Children of Levi, refining them like gold and silver— then they will once again make offerings to God in righteousness. 4 Then the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to God as they were in former Days, in years long past.*

Here we are, the second Sunday of Advent already! How did that happen? I know we've all been distracted lately by vaccinations and variants and other concerns. It makes sense. But only three weeks to Christmas? Is anyone else having trouble lately tracking the passing of days, weeks, and seasons? Yet here we are already in Advent, a season given to slowing down the mad rush and commercial countdown, a season of waiting, wondering, and preparing for what comes next. Let's start with a basic question: For what are we waiting in this season? And for what we are preparing?

If I were to ask this question in a kids' sermon, I'm pretty sure a bunch of hands would shoot up in the air and I'd get one of two answers! Jesus, which is always a good bet answer, and Santa. I'll come back to the first of those but starting more with where each of us really is right now, a deeper question is how can these classic Advent themes of waiting and preparation be a resource for us in this time when we are all holding so very much. So much materialism and commercialism wrapped around the holidays. Even when we try to keep it simple with our families, the pressure is relentless! And then there's the stress of managing memories and expectations the holidays conjure and the grief, and for many, the inevitable family conflict and drama. And this year, for a second year in a row, the fact that we are still living through a pandemic, at a time when our democracy and our planet are in grave peril. Who has the time to wait and prepare for Jesus, really? And what does it really mean that we share a whole season, of wonder and song, preparing the way for Christ to draw near to us!

Enter Malachi, and a strange and beautiful image he introduces. He gives us a handle, I think something to hold onto amidst the hustle and bustle and the ongoing vexation of whatever variants. He offers the image of a refiner's fire! He tells us that the messenger of God will come and be "like a refiner's fire." I want us to pause and sit with this one for a bit. It comes up as a prophetic reading every few years, not as well as known the "Comfort, Comfort" or "Prepare the Way of the Lord" lines of Isaiah. There are no familiar carols written about it. The fact is before we ascribe Christian and Christmas meaning to it, we should acknowledge that the image stands alone in Jewish tradition. In Advent and every season, we need to be careful not to read stories from the Hebrew Bible as automatic precursors to or predictions of Christ, as if that's their only reason for being. We can imagine how disrespectful doing so would be to our Jewish siblings who have different understandings of the so-called divine messenger. So, Malachi introduces us, in broader terms, to a process which the faithful of every generation must endure as we and they prepare for a face-to-face encounter with the divine! Malachi says the messenger will sit as a refiner of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and

refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord.' The process sounds kind of painful at first, right? It conjures that fire and brimstone kind of religion to which we have all kinds of allergic reactions, and for good reason. Bear with me here. The message here is clearly one of judgment, in this case upon the priests, the sons of Levi, who were anxiously awaiting that messenger, thinking they were righteous, and that others would be judged. But Malachi broadens to include everyone. The firing and refining process melts away impurities and leaves one ready to face God with a righteous and ready heart and mind. The exposure to the holy fire, heat, and light of God's truth and justice and love has a refining and cleansing effect on one's soul. Yes, purification and judgment of all that sinful dross, we get it! And... yet... if we leave it there, we miss the most important part. For consider what happens when silver or gold are truly refined. They polish up and reveal a marvelous shine. What's more, the process isn't finished until one can see themselves reflected in the mirror-like surface of the metal. It reminds me of when I used to work in fine dining restaurants, through college and grad school. We'd regularly polish the silver and hold up the knife to see if we could see ourselves in it. Hold that thought!

For us as Christians, we read this divine messenger as Christ himself. Jesus, born at Christmas, comes to us as Christmas, like a refiner's fire, to light up the world with God's truth and to reveal the true, shining nature in all of us. The more intentional we are about God drawing near to us at Christmas and our drawing near to God, the more likely we are to undergo something like this refining process. Will it be painful, to encounter the truth of all the dross and tarnish we've been carrying? Yes, maybe a bit. But imagine the great God given brightness of your unique essence that can shine through if you draw near to that fire! Imagine Christ lifting the silver and gold that you are and seeing "God's own face shine in you reflected" to quote a Kate Layzer/Peter Sykes hymn! You see this process of preparing for an encounter with the divine messenger, with that refiner's fire, can help us see ourselves and the world anew. The closer we come, the clearer the view, the more we can see the divine image reflected in each of us. Notice again, the fiery process doesn't melt the substance itself, just the dross. This fire isn't retributive justice intending to punish and put us down. Instead, this fire is restorative, intending to replenish our wondrous essence as the beloved children of God that we already are.

I made it about this far in my sermon prep when I opened my inbox to an online daily UCC devotional written by my beloved predecessor here, Mary Luti. Mary's inimitable gift for words often stops me in my tracks as they did again this week. She was writing about why God chose to become one of us. She offered a few traditional lines of thinking on the matter, say to judge us and save us from our sins, and then zeroed in on a powerful alternative that imagines this: that the "Savior came to divinize us" that is "to give us God's own glory." "In this version," Mary writes, "God empties out to take humanity in. God stoops down to raise us up. God accepts limits to dissolve the limits that made it seem as if God and humans were opposites. The great wonder of the Incarnation is that we're not. If you believe this, then what you're waiting for in Advent is not someone to fix us but someone to reveal us to ourselves." She closes with this gem: "The gift on the horizon is not a moral course correction but a bright mirror, a gaze, a joyous shock of mutual recognition—look, there, the eternal resemblance, the beauty, the dignity, the nearness, the ever-shining love."

I don't think Mary had the refiner's fire of Malachi in mind when she wrote this, but I love how these ideas dovetail. The messenger of the Lord comes not so much to judge or purify or save us from our sin, nor to correct our wayward course. Instead, the messenger comes to reveal and polish off our pre-existing shine and glory! Christ draws near to remind us of who we already are, that is, to reveal us to

ourselves! Christ, the refiner's fire! Us, the banged-up old silver, weathered and tarnished as we are by the exigencies of this life, by our distinct neuroses, by our decisions, for better or worse.

Bryan Stevenson powerfully captures at least one example of this dynamic in his book *Just Mercy*. We've actually got the line on a magnet that hangs on our refrigerator. Stevenson says, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done." Let me say that again. "Each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done!" These are words, like Malachi's, that if we let them simmer within us have the power to reveal us to ourselves anew. They can allow us to see through whatever dross of daily life, those sometimes warped and tarnished views that we have of ourselves or the world may have of us, and we can see us instead through that bright mirror, through the eyes of Christ.

Imagine each day of this season, a different similar sort of reminder, as if in advent calendar format, a daily message to burn away the dross. December 5: Each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done! December 6: Each of us is more than our greatest fears or fixations. December 7: Each of us is more than today's worry or grief. December 8: Each of us is more than others think of us. Dec 9: Each of us is more (or in some cases less!) than we think of ourselves! As we move through the season, can we imagine these little truth tinders burnishing...the dross of our anxiety, the dross of our sin, that is the dross of whatever separates us from true selves, our neighbors, our God, melting away! We can imagine them revealing a new clarity about our lives. Over the season, the phrases may shift and become even more revealing. Each of us is more and more able to recognize the image of God within others. Each of us, more able to see clearly the image of God in ourselves and others! Each of us, more able to see who we really and truly are, as creatures, as human beings, as tender, beloved, forgiven, and free, and held, always held by our ever-loving God. December 25: Each of us is peering in, sneaking a peek inside the manger, and finding there that "bright mirror, that loving gaze, that joyous shock of mutual recognition—look, there, the eternal resemblance, the beauty, the dignity, the nearness, the ever-shining love." Wow! There's a gift worth wondering about, waiting for, and preparing for.

For the divine messenger will come like a refiner's fire! Advent is our refinery in time, a process of self-revelation, a process of God's self-revealing glory, not only in Christ, but in you, and in me and your neighbor.

Tomorrow, or later today, or the next time you pass one or in a restroom, pause for a moment. Look in the mirror. Lean in and imagine, as you do, the bright and shiny face of the child of God that you are. Better still, right now, as we prepare to break bread, take another image to heart, this one with thanks to the brothers at the nearby Episcopal Monastery. They say every time they share the feast, this body of Christ! L: Siblings, behold what you are! To which the congregation responds. C: May we become what we receive!

Advent is a season of beholding! Of beholding who Jesus is and what it means that the refiner's fire is drawing near. It's a season, too, of beholding what we are, acknowledging all the flaws and scuff marks! Most of all, it's a season, even and perhaps most especially this one with all that we are carrying, it's a season that invites us each to shine and share forth more and more the love and glory of God that is already here, and yet always coming our way. Amen!