

Malachi 3:1-4 “Cleaning House”

Today we start week two of our Advent season. Last week we talked about how part of Advent is putting our hope in some *one* or some *thing* that we may not fully understand at first, but we can be assured that it must be good if God promised it. Advent is also about seeking God’s presence among us. Or maybe a better way of saying it is that we’re seeking God’s *appearance* among us. Here’s the advantage we have in the church though: We know how the Advent story ends. We know where this is all leading to. It ends with the birth of Jesus. And honestly it’s not too hard to celebrate the arrival of a baby is it? I know Ken Chandler is about ready to burst out of his skin now because he’s so excited about the arrival of his first grand baby. Who doesn’t smile at the thought of a new baby? Most of the time it’s a lot of fun.

But let’s put ourselves in the shoes of the people who Malachi was addressing in this morning’s scripture. They didn’t know anything about a baby. All they knew is that Malachi said, “Who will be able to endure the day when he comes? Who will be able to survive when he appears? He will be like strong soap, like a fire that refines metal.” I don’t know about you but that sounds a lot less appealing than welcoming a little baby! And we’re probably a lot more sensitive to the notion of a “fire that burns away all impurities” right now. But that is certainly one of the functions of fire, especially if you’re a blacksmith. When you’re trying to make the best and strongest metal, the core of what is good and precious is able to withstand the heat, but whatever is impure is burned away. “Who will be able to endure the day when he comes?”

If we chose to study the gospel lesson today, we would have heard about John the Baptizer and how he came to warn us that the day of the Lord’s appearing is both great and terrible. “The crooked ways will be made straight and the rough ways made smooth.” Sound’s great if it’s happening *in front of you* on a long journey, but if it’s happening *to you*,

it's a bit more daunting. But it still gives us an indication of what this "refining" or "purifying" is all about. Malachi says that the reason we are to be purified is so that we might "bring to the Lord the right kind of offerings," offerings which are pleasing to God. Well what does this mean to bring "the right kind of offering?" When we bring an offering to God, we're talking about our *response* to God ... about our *approach* to God. When we experience God's grace and God's extravagant love and goodness, we find ourselves unable to respond any other way than with worship. And I strongly believe that our worship can be expressed in the way we live. It can also be expressed in personal or corporate expressions of praise, thanksgiving and adoration. And when worship comes from a deep, heartfelt sense of awe and wonder at God's extravagant love for us, it's our most valuable offering. Good worship can overwhelm our senses, and can set our hearts singing and dancing. Many of you who've walked in faith a lot longer than I have might know what I'm talking about here. You've all journeyed far more deeply into the mysteries of God's grace than I have. Others of you may be just starting on that journey and have seen a little glimpse of what can be.

So, some of you might ask, "Ok, if it's so good what's all this about strong soap and refining fire?" What in the world does that have to do with worship? Well it's like this. Those of you who've been in or attempted any kind of deep love relationship will know that one of the biggest threats to relationships is the baggage you bring into it. It's all that psychic garbage that you've accumulated since before your first conscious memory. That baggage has got to be acknowledged and has got to go or else the quality of the relationship will be shallow and mediocre at best ... and damaging and disastrous at worst. It's not much different with worship and how it correlates with our relationship with Jesus. Again, that baggage has got to go. In Malachi's time the problem was taking on a very specific outward form. When people came to bring animals from their flocks to offer to God in the temple, they were often bringing the duds. They were deliberately making second-rate offerings. So when Malachi spoke of bringing offerings that are pleasing to God, it

had a quite specific and concrete meaning for the people he was speaking to, and that was: “You need to be bringing the best you have, not the rejects.”

Okay, but we Christians don’t have to fiddle around with that old sacrificial system, right? Because if Jesus came to challenge and put an end to it why are we even talking about it? Because now we’re talking about a spiritual offering. Decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Apostle Paul urged his readers to offer *themselves* as *living* sacrifices, “holy and acceptable to God.” Why? Because “this is true worship.” Well then, when you offer *yourself*, what is the *quality* of your offering? When you come into this relationship with God through Jesus, do you have what it takes? God wants the best, and will settle for nothing less, not only for God’s sake but for ours, because worship is a dialogue. It goes both ways, and we gain as much from true worship as God does and so for our sakes, God wants it to be the best.

The good thing is that God does not require our best and then just leaves it up to us to figure it all out. God takes responsibility for uncovering the baggage and providing that refining fire to get rid of it. Now we can decline the invitation, but we can’t ever say we didn’t have the opportunity to be refined. All of our pretenses, all of our carefully cultivated neuroses, all of the masks we put on, all our well-rehearsed psychological games, all our little ways of manipulating one another for our own gain - all this psycho-spiritual baggage in whatever form it may take, all has to be burned away by God’s refining fire before we can say, “This is the best worship we have to offer.”

And let me tell you, it can be painful to go through that refining fire. We want to hold on to that baggage because we don’t know what to do without it! Yeah, but isn’t this baggage exactly what interferes with our closest relationships? Aren’t these the thing things that paralyze our minds with anxieties? That hold us back from becoming the people we

know we *could* be and desperately *want* to be? Aren't these exactly the same things that keep us doing what we *don't* want to do? That render us powerless to unleash all that potential that we know God has created within us? Yeah! And you know what? They're also exactly the things that Jesus came to save us from: And that's whatever comes between you and God ... whatever holds down the image of God within you. And sure being saved from them can be painful. Being set free can be excruciating. But once you're freed, you never want to go back.

As many of you can attest, once you've tasted the first fruits of true worship ... once you've experienced that genuine deep relationship with God, you are so overwhelmed with gratitude that you welcome anything that can strip away more of that baggage so that you can keep getting closer to God. You'll be more willing and equipped to embrace hardships, deprivations, rejections, or sufferings. Because they all become part of that refining fire ... that part of God's power to strip away the impurities and open a path for a deeper, fuller, more meaningful life. And the more you experience that, the more you will say, "Come, Lord Jesus, come. Send your messengers to prepare us, to make straight our crooked ways, to make smooth our rough ways, to make whole our brokenness. Lead us into holiness and justice and all that makes for true worship."