

December 5th, 2021

Malachi 3:1-4 “Who Will Endure?”

Last month I asked the folks in Bible study what they'd like to study once we finish Kings. Someone said, “How about the minor prophets? We hear a lot about the major prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. What about some of these hard-to-pronounce minor prophets that we don't hear much about like Haggai, Zephaniah and Habakkuk?” And I replied, “Okay, but fair warning, some of these books are hard to understand and can be challenging and downright disturbing.” And they're all like, “Not a problem. Bring it on.” Okay. So as I started planning for Advent, I pulled out my lectionary calendar to see what was coming up. And “what to my wondering eyes should appear,” but a list of scriptures from Malachi, Zephaniah and Micah. Hallelujah. Let's see how many of you still want to study the minor prophets after this.

Advent is all about the buildup to Jesus' birth. When you study the history of Israel, there's three things you learn right before Israel becomes an official Kingdom. You learn that God opposes the proud and exalts the humble, that God is always working to redeem the world despite human evil, and that God will raise up a messianic king. Ok, what sets a “messianic” king apart from a regular king? Well, a messiah is one who is divinely chosen and appointed to lead and save a particular group of people, in this case Israel. When King David, Israel's greatest King came to power, he made a covenant with God. God said, “If you keep my commandments, and follow me, I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more.” Even though David is considered Israel's greatest King, he didn't do a very good job at keeping God's commandments which unfortunately turned into an avalanche of misfortunes that divided Israel and eventually led to their capture and deportation to Babylon. That's when Israel started asking about this messianic king again, and that's when these hard-to-pronounce prophets started preaching some

inconvenient truths about who this messiah will be and what kind of kingdom you can expect him to initiate.

Our Advent theme this year is, “Seeking God Among Us.” Advent Season is about preparing for God’s appearance among us, in this case through the Christ Child, Jesus. Preparing to welcome God among us is pretty easy if we just focus on Christmas because anyone can celebrate the arrival of a baby. Babies are awesome. Babies are fun and cute. Ask Peggy’s family ... Josh and Juliana just had a baby this past week! But the prophet Malachi cautions us to think twice before we frivolously say, “Come Lord Jesus” without thinking about what that really means.

Malachi asks, “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 baby. Fire refines metal by burning away all the impurities. The core of what is good and valuable is able to withstand the heat, but the impurities are *burned* away. The other image is a little harder to understand until you think about it - What is “strong soap” and what’s so bad about it? Anybody ever use “Gojo?” This is strong soap. It’s soap that is laced with sand and citrus oil. I use this when I’ve been painting or working on something that’s greasy and oily and hard to wash off my skin. Is it effective? You bet. But is it something I’d use for body wash every day in the shower? Absolutely not. It does *not* feel very good to wash with Gojo, but it’s the best thing to use when you’re covered with dirt, paint, or oil. “Who will be able to endure the day when he comes?” Who will be able to face the fire? Who will be able to wash their body with Gojo?

Our call to worship this morning was the Canticle of Zechariah, which is based on the song that John the Baptist’s father used at the birth of his son in Luke chapter 1. The song is about calling God’s people back to the covenant God made with David and how God is refining us and restoring us to the condition we were meant to be in so that “we might worship without fear and be holy and just all our days.” Malachi also

states that the reason we are to be purified by strong soap and fire is so that we might “bring to the Lord the right kind of offerings,” offerings which are pleasing to God. Bring the right kind of offerings; worship without fear; be holy and just in all our days. It’s all about our *response* to God. It’s all about our *approach* to God. When we truly experience the love and grace of God, we find ourselves unable to respond any other way than to worship. And as we learned back in September, worship can be expressed in the way we live and act. Being holy and just can 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 ... when worship is an unstoppable outpouring, it overwhelms your senses. It sets your heart singing and dancing within you. It melts you and merges you into a cosmic oneness with all that is beautiful in the universe. It’s heaven. Now if your idea of heaven is a cookie jar that’s always full, I don’t know what to say to you because what Malachi is talking about is much bigger than that. The writer of the Book of Revelation described heaven as eternal worship, which may sound kind of boring, but if you consider the things that he describes in that book, you’ll say, “I’ll have what he’s having!” because it’s clear that his experience of worship was mind-blowingly awesome.

Okay, but if it’s so great what’s all this talk about strong soap and fire? Well, it’s like this - Those of you who’ve attempted any kind of deep love relationship will know that the biggest threat to a relationship is the baggage you bring. It’s that psychic garbage that you’ve been accumulating since the day you were born. And if you’re going to maintain a healthy, loving relationship, that baggage has *got* to go or else the quality of the relationship will be shallow and mediocre at its best ... damaging and disastrous at its worst.

It's no different with worship. Worship is the *heart* of your relationship with God. That means all the baggage and the garbage you bring has to

go. We've been talking a lot about the Jewish sacrificial system this past year. The problem that God's people were having back in Malachi's time was that when they came to bring animals from their flocks to offer to God in the temple, they were bringing the duds. They were scraping the bottom of the barrel. They were doing the bare minimum. They were deliberately making second-rate offerings. So when Malachi challenges people to bring offerings that are *pleasing* to God, it had a very specific and concrete meaning: Bring your best ... not your rejects.

Okay, but we don't practice animal sacrifice anymore. At least not in the Christian Church. What difference does it make what Malachi is saying here? Because the Apostle Paul encourages the church to offer *ourselves* as living sacrifices. In Romans 12:1 Paul writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a *living sacrifice*, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." That's *true* worship right there. So if *you* are the offering, what is the quality of that which you have to offer? When you come into this relationship with God, what do you bring? God wants the best. If we settle for less, then we're saying "no" to the best of what we can *receive* from worship.

Fortunately, God does not require our best only to just leave it up to us to get it all together. God takes responsibility for uncovering the baggage and providing the refining fire. We can decline the invitation, of course, 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 our intricately painted masks, all of our rehearsed psychological games, all of our little ways of manipulating one another for our own gain – all this baggage has to be burned or scrubbed away by God's refining fire and strong soap before we will experience the depth of what is available in our worship.

Yeah, but it's *painful* to go through fire. It's *painful* to use this "strong soap." But isn't getting rid of this baggage exactly what we're longing for deep inside? Isn't this the same baggage that hinders our closest *human* relationships too? Aren't these the things that paralyze our minds with anxieties and holds 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 and render us powerless to unleash all the potential that we know God has created within us? Yes. Of course they are. And they are exactly the things that Jesus came to deliver us from. Jesus delivers us from whatever comes between you and God and whatever holds down the image of God within you. And yes, this can be painful. Being set free can be agonizing. It can be like breaking out of the worst prison you can imagine through a hole that's not quite big enough. If you've ever seen the *Shawshank Redemption*, you know what I mean. You crawl through the muck and the mud and may even lose some skin on the way out, but once you experienced that kind of freedom, you would *never* go back.

As many of you can attest, once you've experienced true worship and a genuine deep relationship with Jesus, you are so overwhelmed with gratitude and love that you welcome the furnace. You welcome anything that can strip away more of that baggage. And the more you experience this, the more you'll say, "Come, Lord Jesus, Come." Come as strong soap, come as refining fire, come carrying a cross. But come. Send your messengers to prepare us, to make our crooked ways straight, to make our rough ways smooth, and to make our brokenness whole. Lead us into holiness and justice and all that makes for true worship, and come, Lord Jesus, come.