

Sermon: Advent 2C 12/8/24

Peace, Danville Pr. Lucy Kolin, preacher

Texts: Mal. 3:1-4, Phil. 1:3-11, Lk 3:1-16

Elie Wiesel, the great Jewish writer, tells how as a boy every day when he returned from school, his mother asked him: “Did you have a good **question** today?” Well, today **we** have a very good question, but also a very **hard** question that comes from the school of **scripture**, specifically from the book of the prophet Malachi. But before we get to the question, we should talk a bit about Malachi. Most prophetic books have the name of the particular prophet whose experiences and pronouncements make up the book. But “Malachi” is not a proper name – it simply means “messenger.” So who exactly the messenger is isn’t clear and can change as the book is read by different people in different times. We’ll say more about that later. Right now what we **do** know is this book is telling God’s people **someone** is being sent by God to give them a message, a message that will involve not just **words** but also **action**.

The book of Malachi is set in the time after the exile in Babylon had ended and after the Jerusalem temple had been rebuilt. It’s written as a series of disputations, formal arguments between the people and God. For example, the book opens with God saying, “I have shown you love” and the people asking, “**How** have you shown us love?” And on and on it goes, until finally God says, “Enough! You are saying, ‘Bring on the day of the Lord!’ – thinking it will bring divine judgment for your enemies and divine approval for you. But I tell you, think twice, because that day will **also** involve judgment for **you** and a process of refining and reforming, of fire and cleansing to shape **you anew** as God’s covenant people. Because the way you’ve been behaving and worshiping is not acceptable to me; you try to cut corners in worship and in your tithes and offerings; **and** you cheat workers, abandon widows, neglect orphans, refuse to welcome strangers. But now my

messenger is coming to burn away **your** sin and to scrub away **your** stubborn resistance to what I've asked of you and what you already promised to do. Then the image of God will shine in you again, a reflection of my glory and a beacon to the world.

And **now** for the question of the day, a question that pops up in the midst of announcing the refining, reforming messenger, a question that continues through the ages and so is **also** addressed to **us**: "But who can endure the day of his coming?" If you know anything about classical music, you're perhaps already hearing in your mind that great aria from Handel's *Messiah*, with all those notes that move back and forth relentlessly like a scrub brush on the heart and soul. This is **another kind** of preparation, one we don't always associate with Advent.

We should say that the book of Malachi **does** end with promise...or really **promises**, including the promise that God would send Elijah again **before** the day of the Lord. Indeed, there is a long, long silence, centuries long during which the voice of the prophet – **any** prophet – is not heard **until** the person we meet today in the gospel: Zechariah and Elizabeth's son, John the Baptizer, who many saw as Elijah, the fulfillment of God's promise. Remember how we said that in Malachi the identity of the messenger wasn't clear and could shift as the prophetic word was heard by different people in different generations? Well, it wasn't a big stretch for the gospel writers to make the connection between the messenger of the book of Malachi and the messenger called John. And if **anybody** was a firebrand and a scrub-brush for God, surely **John** was. He, **too**, burst suddenly on the scene. He **too** came as a refining fire and offered cleansing, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Using the words of **another** prophet, Isaiah, he announced the crooked would be made straight and the rough places smooth. And he made no distinctions – this call was for **everyone**, religious leaders, soldiers, housewives, and merchants,

and would prepare a way, **clear** the way for “all flesh...[to] see the salvation of God” whom **we** call Jesus.

So what about **us**? The word of the Lord has come to **us, too**, a word of judgment and of promise. But that word can be a little hard to bear. We are not all that eager to be scrubbed clean and refined...we’d prefer if that process was applied to someone **else**, to people we think **really** need it.

But to be refined and scrubbed clean at God’s initiative is a **good** thing, because it tells us we are **so precious** to God that God wants to keep us beautiful and shining, so the image of God in which we were created will not be cloudy, rusted, or hard to see, so we **ourselves** won’t block the appearing of the Son of God. And the One who **ultimately** has the power to refine and cleanse us is the One promised and foretold...God himself who came to us as one of us in Jesus Christ. So God knows what we are like, our temptations, our alibis and excuses, our sin and its consequences. And, although our God is not a “whatever” sort of God, our God has a clear and unswerving purpose, that “...all...be saved and...come to the knowledge of the truth” – the truth about God, the truth about us, and the truth about Jesus who **is** the Truth. Christ with us and among us judges us, but also saves us, so that we can stand before him pure and blameless and without fear when he comes again “in glory to judge the living and the dead.”

So we wait with hope not fear, with honesty about our need for salvation, with openness to the scrub-brush and the fire, which, in the hands of God, will not destroy us but rather reveal our beauty. So today we say, “Scrub out the manger of my heart and polish the wood, so I can receive you, Lord Jesus, with sincere faith and holy joy.” And we sing with Zechariah the song of the **new** future God has prepared for us and claim it as our own in the **present**, confident that “the One who **began** a good work among [us] will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” This is the Advent good news. Amen.

