

Malachi 3:1-4

Look! I am sending my messenger! He will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord, whom you are seeking, will come to his temple! The Messenger of the Covenant, in whom you delight, will surely come, says the LORD of Armies.

²But who can endure the day when he comes? Who will remain standing when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire, like launderers bleach! ³He will be seated like a refiner and a purifier of silver. He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and like silver. They will belong to the LORD and bring him an offering in righteousness.

⁴Judah and Jerusalem's offerings will be pleasing to the LORD as they were in the days of old, in years long ago.

Peace

I.

Early in the morning the Fuller was off to work. These days it seems like such a simple task: you carry the laundry to the laundry room, stuff it in the machine, add some tide and perhaps a little bit of bleach with your whites, pick your settings and walk away until the timer signals you the load is done.

Not so for the Fuller in Bible times. It was a dirty job, but somebody had to do it. Alkali was involved. There was a kind of bleach, usually stale urine, and even some chalk in the mixture. The agitator in the tub of water was not a mechanical beater-bar, but a person's feet, or possibly a wooden bat of some sort. More beating of the fibers was done—pounding out the cloth on rocks nearby. Eventually, with as much dirt pounded out as possible—which had the added effect of softening the fibers of the fabric—the clothing was stretched out on the rocks in the sun to dry and to get some additional bleaching.

Most of the time, the practitioners of this art were banished to outside the city limits to an area where there was lots of water available for the task, lots of room to spread things out, and an area far enough away from others so that the offensive smells created by the process would not permeate everyone's living space. Doing the laundry was a dirty, smelly, backbreaking business. But it resulted in beautiful, bleached-white robes.

The Second Sunday in Advent is said to have the theme "Peace." The second candle on the Advent wreath is the "Peace" candle. But you won't find the word "peace" in *any* of the readings in today's pericope. When you look at today's sermon text—the Old Testament Lesson from Malachi—you find some rather violent descriptions. The launderer was picked on because we don't think that job is so bad today, but it was dirty and disgusting work for most of human existence.

Malachi also talks about the process of refining. *That* job might still be seen for the dirty job that it is. Heating metal hot enough to burn off and separate the impurities before the metal is used to make the finished product.

The dirt has to be removed. The slag has to be burned off and skimmed from the final product. Purifying—whether it is metal or cloth—is a dirty business.

II.

Many people of my generation recognize the phrase "Peace through strength." It was a phrase re-popularized by President Ronald Reagan, but the first President in U.S. History who alluded to it was President George Washington. In his 1793 State of the Union Address,

Washington said: “If we desire to secure peace, one of the most powerful instruments of our rising prosperity, it must be known that we are at all times ready for war” (<https://bit.ly/2B3iOH1>). Washington was echoing the sentiments of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, who advocated a “Peace through Strength” policy in the First Century.

Peace is a dirty business—just like purifying metal or cloth. Peace is best maintained by a show of force that puts off would-be attackers. Police show up, and criminals often back up and flee. A nuclear submarine patrols a coastline, and a nation thinks twice about attacking another nation. At least, in theory.

Peace is a dirty business when it comes to the human heart, too. Like ore dug out of the ground or like fibers newly taken from the cotton plant or from shearing the sheep, the human heart—by nature—is impure and unclean. It needs purification. There can’t be any peace in this Second Sunday in Advent with all the impurities caused by sin.

“Look! I am sending my messenger! He will prepare the way before me” (Malachi 3:1, EHV). Malachi looked ahead to John the Baptist, just as Isaiah—who was quoted in today’s gospel—did.

Today’s gospel said of John: “He went into the whole region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3, EHV). Unbelief and apathy ran rampant in the Days of John the Baptist, just as they had in the days of Malachi. People weren’t too worried about God and weren’t too interested in worshiping the One True God. People still don’t think church needs to be much of a priority. There are so many other things to occupy their time. God takes a back seat. Those who come to worship carefully carve out one hour a week, but not much more, to give any thought to God and to their need to be purified.

“For he will be like a refiner’s fire, like launderers bleach!” (Malachi 3:2, EHV). Fire and bleach are like God’s law. There is to be pain over our sin and our inability to cleanse ourselves. Self-righteousness is burned up by the law’s standards. Pride is washed away in the law’s demands. Purification is needed to take away things that we love more than God—things that hinder our relationship with our Lord Jesus.

Just as in a batch of ore or in the fibers of plants or animals being prepared to make clothing, there is dirt and grime and the impurity of sin throughout the human nature. Peace is a dirty business, indeed.

III.

“The Messenger of the Covenant, in whom you delight, will surely come, says the LORD of Armies. ²But Who can endure the day when he comes? Who will remain standing when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire, like launderers bleach!” (Malachi 3:1-2, EHV).

And so comes your Lord Jesus. The work of your purification was not an easy business. It was the dirtiest of dirty jobs. It made the fuller’s job of stomping in the caustic soap mixture to stir up the wash load before beating the fabric to soften and finish the cleaning process seem like a walk in the park. It made the hot, burning work of skimming the impurities off the ore just out of the furnace seem like sitting comfortably by a warm fire in the evening.

Jesus’ work to purify was anything *but* easy or comfortable. His whole life was a work of keeping himself clean and pure so that he would be eligible to do the work that was necessary to save us. His death on the cross burned every impurity from our record. His blood was the bleach that washed every human heart clean from every stain.

Perhaps to us Jesus' work of salvation seems like a painless process. We do not—we *can* not—do anything to purify ourselves or make ourselves right with God. The process was anything *but* painless for Jesus. Like the fuller entering his field to cleanse the clothing or the refiner sitting down to skim off the slag, the job was intense. The scourge on his back, the nails in his hands and feet, the abandonment of God on his soul. The pain of taking away your sin and mine was 100% on the Lord Jesus.

IV.

“He will be seated like a refiner and a purifier of silver. He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and like silver. They will belong to the LORD and bring him an offering in righteousness. ⁴Judah and Jerusalem's offerings will be pleasing to the LORD as they were in the days of old, in years long ago” (Malachi 3:3-4, EHV).

Jesus has saved us from the ultimate destruction of hell by taking the punishment of hell for us. He is the refiner. But we are the silver—we take the heat. He is the launderer. We are the dirty laundry who need special cleansing and bleaching. Even after having been cleansed from sin by Jesus' work, we need ongoing purification—not to make us right with God this time, but to keep any impurities out of our lives that would interfere with our relationship with God. He purifies us by giving us weaknesses to force us to rely on him for strength. He gives us sorrow, forcing us to look to him for the deepest consolation that could possibly be.

Jesus died to purify us to save us from ultimate destruction. But he saved us for more than that. He saved us to purify us for the purpose for which mankind was originally created—to love and glorify God. “They will bring him an offering in righteousness,” Malachi says. We already *belong* to the Lord because Jesus has purified us with his perfect sacrifice. Now we offer ourselves—all that we are and all that we have—to give thanks to God for the salvation he won for us.

Have you ever noticed how much work goes into big days? A Christmas party is fun, but there are hours of planning and preparation involved. The joys of a couple's wedding day are preceded by months of planning.

Right now we are in the period of work to get ready for the party of heaven. The angels sang on Christmas Day about peace on earth. We have the peace won by Jesus on the cross. And now we get ready for our eternal peace by thanking our Lord Jesus and relying on him to continue purifying our lives so that we are ready for the life to come. Amen.