

So Refined.....
Malachi 3: 1-4; Luke 3: 1-6
Don Lincoln

A couple weeks ago a colleague was at another church midweek – and as we pastors tend to do when we are in another church – he picked up their Sunday bulletin for the past Sunday – November 25th. At the top of the bulletin, it said “Second Sunday of Advent” – and he thought – what a crazy typo THAT was to have in the church bulletin. This was a couple of weeks ago and we hadn’t even started Advent. TODAY is the second Sunday of Advent!

Only to discover after the reading through the bulletin that it wasn’t a typo – and the explanation was on the back....

“This year we are starting the Advent season two weeks earlier than scheduled. The main reason for this is to place a more significant emphasis on Christmas. The Christmas season is only 2 weeks long. The first Sunday is traditionally a very low attendance Sunday, and the second is always the day of Epiphany. So in reality, the Christmas season is just Christmas Eve and one more Sunday.” Christmas is just too short.

I didn’t grow up with much Advent. Advent would’ve been pretty counter-intuitive for me as a young boy. And it still is for many people; they want Christmas carols; want this season to be decorated and wrapped and pretty and colorful and Merry-Christmas-ed. Advent can be such a downer. And I get it. But most pastors and theologians I know crave Advent.

I remember a colleague once suggesting that we in the church should put pressure on Hallmark for Advent cards.¹ Why is it Hallmark hasn’t caught on to this missed opportunity? They have cards for everything – most of them a single day – Valentine’s Day, Birthday, anniversary, graduation..... Heck, Advent is FOUR weeks long! Think of all the opportunities to send cards to friends – it would take up aisles and aisles in the drug store card section – ADVENT cards!

Imagine cards to send to family and friends with Malachi on the front – and a text inside about refining fires, and nothing about chestnuts roasting?

Or imagine sending cards with John the Baptist on the cover – long-haired, ragged and dirty, knee-deep in the Jordan, with steady gaze and arms outstretched towards the holder of the card with an attitude of invitation, but inside the card a single word in fancy holiday script, “Repent!”?

If you like a little verse, something like:

The messiah is coming, make His way straight.
Repent of your sins, or suffer sin’s awful fate.
Happy Advent!

How about this: “Alexa – play an Advent tune.....”

Audio clip from Handel's Messiah played with words on screen.

*For he is like a refiner's fire.
Who shall stand when he appeareth?
For he is like a refiner's fire.
And who shall stand when he appeareth?*

I doubt if that piece from Handel's Messiah is on anybody's Christmas playlist, and you won't hear it on B-101, or cable's Sounds of the Season.

But – I do crave Advent. Because I don't want to miss the real promise, nor the transforming possibilities of the coming of Christ. Nor do I want to pretend that all is right with the world, just because there are lots of pretty lights and bows and decorations and good wishes in this season.

The prophet who wrote the last book in Hebrew Scripture – the book of Malachi – and it may be an anonymous book because Malachi simply means “messenger” – wanted to make clear both the promise AND the implications of God's coming. Malachi was speaking of the need for a thorough season of renewal – a cleansing of the temple during a time of spiritual decline in the 5th Century BCE. A time when slovenly priests and careless worshipers made unworthy offerings, basically not giving the Lord or the faith the time of day.

The word of the Lord came to Malachi as a word of promise. God is coming. Like for us, in this Advent season, that promise comes as good news. God IS COMING. But there is also some degree of uneasiness for us in the promise. There are elements of the promise you and I would love to see fulfilled and other elements².....not so much....

Malachi may be the first writer in the history of literature to employ the “good news – bad news” tactic.

Good News: “The Lord you seek will suddenly come to his temple.”

Bad News: “But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when He appears?”

Good News: “The messenger in whom you delight is coming.”

Bad News: “For He is like a refiner's fire and a fuller's soap.”

I would guess our response to this text is not much different from the response of Malachi's original audience. Like them, we want to see the day of God's coming. We want to see the restoration of the covenant. We want to see things made right – the way God intends them to be... mostly. There's that part of us that's not so sure. We do not want to go through too much change or pain to see it happen.³

If you're like me, you respond to this promise by wondering what **EXACTLY**, does he mean by “refining?” And how much will it hurt? What might I have to give up, or change or rearrange in my life, in order to be gold and silver?

Refining fire sounds pretty rough. And it may be. But it doesn't say **incinerating** fire. It's not a fire designed to consume everything, but rather to get rid of the dross – the impurities; the non-essentials; that which is unnecessary, unworthy, unhelpful.

Which – if you didn't catch it – implies one thing: What is underneath is precious. Valuable. Worth saving. Worth purifying. Not to be abandoned, or thrown out on the trash heap, but renewed; reclaimed; a treasure to the Lord. Purifying and refining isn't for the sake of making you and me squirm, it's for the sake of making you and me right – making us whole – making us who we were intended to be all along. Because you and I know, if we want the world to be as it is intended to be in God's eyes – it has to include – yes maybe even BEGIN with us!

I recently ran across this one memento I have from my grandmother Lincoln, my Dad's mother. It's an old Lenox sugar bowl. This is what it looked like when I found it in the back of a cabinet I was tidying up.



Then with a little work – a little elbow grease, some rubbing, some polishing and some time as it took awhile – it looks like this.



What was underneath is precious. In this season of waiting you and I are called to be attentive to our lives, our world – wherever they are broken and tarnished – and make ready.

A good spiritual harvest may require a refining, purifying fire. That's the message of Malachi. Faithfulness in Advent involves focusing on God's incarnation in our lives. Refining is aimed at transformation and liberation of what is best in us and our communities. It involves a new heart and a generous spirit.⁴

Which is what John the Baptist's message was all about. John is always paired with Malachi in this Advent reading on this Sunday of Advent – whenever Malachi shows up – every three years John the Baptist is there – because he is seen as the messenger of the Coming One.

John's message – "REPENT" – may sound harsh, but it is ultimately liberating. Despite our participation in the ways of death, you and I can turn around. You and I can use the freedom we have to change our ways, to transform our value systems, create structures of life instead of death. This is the message of Advent: prepare for the coming of Christ by changing our lives that we might give birth to Christ within and among us.

Read John's words – Luke 3: 7-14.

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

Doing the right thing.

I listened to Jon Meacham's tribute to George H. W. Bush. Regardless whether or not you agree with everything President Bush did during his run, Meacham's tribute was moving and meaningful to me. Here's part of what he said.

"His tongue may have run amuck at moments, but his heart was steadfast. His life code, as he said, was "Tell the truth. Don't blame people. Be strong. Do your best. Try hard. Forgive. Stay the course." And that was and is the most American of creeds. Abraham Lincoln's "better angels of our nature" and George H.W. Bush's "thousand points of light" are companion verses in America's national hymn. For Lincoln and Bush both called on us to choose the right over the convenient, to hope rather than to fear, and to heed not our worst impulses, but our best instincts."

God knows what is underneath is precious; but Advent is that season when you and I remember we need again and again to uncover it – clean off the dirt, polish off the tarnish, fix the broken

pieces. We need to crave Advent – do our Advent work – make ourselves a little more good and right and ready for His coming, for when you and I do, we make the world a little more ready too – in fact, that’s how the world sees what His coming looks like, in the flesh. In our flesh.

Happy Advent!
Amen.

1. Brian Donst, *Sermonshop* Notes, 2003.
2. Seth Moland-Kovash; *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, Malachi 3: 1-4.
3. *ibid.*
4. Bruce Epperly, *The Adventurous Lectionary*, Patheos.com; December 9, 2018.