

The Message

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, December 6, 2009)

Malachi 3:1-4 ¹See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ²But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:1-6 ¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

How do you send messages to other people? A lot of folks use their cell phones to send text messages, although you better not do it while driving, according to a law that went into effect this past week. Some people use e-mail, or variations such as face-book, twitter or blogs. And I am sure most of us have used voice mail from time to time, whether we want to or not, to leave messages for people we are trying to call when they are not in. We have probably all used letters to send messages, and in years gone by, we might have used the telegraph, or if we can claim any Native American ancestry, our ancestors may have used smoke signals. In the rain forests of West Africa they used talking drums – huge drums, carved out of large tree trunks, that can send their booming rhythms resounding through the dense jungles. In the Savannah of West Africa we didn't use that long distance communication, but we had smaller drums.

But what would you do if you had a really important message to give to someone that was very special to you? Wouldn't you want to go in person, and sit down with that person, so that you can fully explain your message and be sure they understand? Or if you couldn't go yourself, wouldn't you at least want somebody you know and trust to go and deliver your message, to make sure it was heard, and received and understood?

Malachi was God's messenger, a trusted messenger, sent by God with a very important message for people who were very special to God. In fact, we can't be completely sure that his name was Malachi, because Malachi, in Hebrew, can be simply translated, “my messenger.” But the name of the messenger is not important. What is important, first of all, is that this was God's own messenger. And the message being brought was not one of comfort, or peace or joy, but a warning. Malachi brought the warning from God that God himself was coming, and although the people of Israel thought that when God would come again, their kingdom would be restored and they would again be a gathered, great nation, that was not Malachi's message. His message from God had some stern warnings, perhaps best summed up in verses 2 and 3:

First, a reality check for those who thought they were safe from God's wrath, simply because they were God's chosen people. Malachi warned them, “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”

And then he went on to describe what would happen. God's people would be refined by fire and cleansed by fuller's soap. Ok, we might understand that image of the refiner's fire. We may have heard stories about how precious metals can be refined by burning off impurities. I am sure that each one of us would admit that we have some impurities, some of which it would be nice if they would be refined away. But what is the "fuller's soap?" In the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9, verse 3, as Mark is describing the transfiguration of Christ, he states that Jesus' garments became "...so intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them." From that verse we might have the image that fuller's soap is like bleach, so that when you scrub your clothes they will become white, dazzling white. OK, if that is the image, ask yourself, how much scrubbing with bleach will God have to do to you before your spirit becomes pure and dazzling white?

We can't be sure how the people in Malachi's day responded to his message. We don't have much of a record of a change in attitude among God's people, because even in Jesus' day, some 600 years later, the attitude still prevailed that when God comes again, oppressors will be overthrown and Israel will return to the days of glory. On the other hand, we do have some record how the people responded to the next messenger from God, at least the next messenger as recorded in Scripture, which was John the Baptist. First of all, we know that huge crowds came to hear him. Whether they listened or not, we may not know for sure, but some did respond, in faith, and were baptized.

I would remind you that John's baptism was not the same as our baptism in the church. When we are baptized it is a public profession of our faith, a commitment that we have chosen to follow in the way of Jesus Christ, or as Scripture says, when we are baptized, we are baptized into Christ's death, so that we might also share in Christ's resurrection. But John's baptism, as stated in our lesson, was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It doesn't say that fuller's soap was used, but the same concept comes to mind, that through John's baptism, one was cleansed of sin, and made pure and acceptable to God.

We still cling to some of that image in our baptism. We often use phrases in our hymns and songs that Jesus washed my sins away, and in the Nicene Creed we say the words, "We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins." And yet, for most of us, that baptism was so many years ago that each one of us have had many opportunities to dirty our spirits, and some of us have been quite successful in getting downright filthy, spiritually. And so we need reminders. We need to hear those words of John again, "Prepare the way of the Lord." We need to make the crooked places in our lives straight, and the rough parts in our personalities need to be made smooth.

There is probably no other holiday, religious or secular, where we give so much time and energy to preparing. Some of our neighbors put out lawn decorations for Thanksgiving and even lights for Halloween, but everyone seems to go all out preparing for Christmas. There are decorations to put up, gifts to buy, cookies and cakes to bake, cards to send, and depending on your tradition, maybe even a bucket of coal to set out for the Belsnickle.

But what about preparing your heart, your spirit? Is there some dirty spot in your soul, some stain in your spirit, that you would especially like God to clean for you? Don't wait to make it a New Year's Resolution – those get broken anyway. But take a few moments as you prepare for Christmas and prepare your soul as well as your home. This is the message, from a God who loves you and considers you very special, sent to us through a very reliable messenger, actually, through several messengers:

"Prepare a way for the Lord. Indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of Hosts." Amen.