

The Refining, Purifying, Justifying Message  
Malachi 3:1-7b  
December 6, 2015

*“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But 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. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. “Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. “For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.*

Advent is about preparation. We use this time as a way of preparing our hearts and minds for Christ's coming – His past, present, and future coming for the purpose of saving His people from their sin.

Every year the appointed Gospel lessons for the second and third weeks of Advent are about John the Baptist; the man whom God Himself sent to announce the physical coming of Jesus. Of course, the work and person of John the Baptist didn't just happen out of the blue. God prepared His people for the coming of the advanced messenger.

John's message wasn't going to be easy to hear or receive. God was giving His people a heads-up. He prepared His people for the message and messenger long before John the Baptist was born. We read in Isaiah: *“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God”* (Is 40:3 ESV).

Here in Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, written four centuries before John the Baptist and Jesus would physically walk the earth, God speaks of sending His messenger to prepare the way before Him. The first words of the text say: *Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me* (Mal 3:1 ESV). The messenger is clearly John.

As the one sent to prepare the way of the Lord; to make the paths straight, the valleys high, and the mountains low, John the Baptist had a tough and unenviable job. John was the one sent to be the messenger of repentance. This sounds like a no-brainer, but you'd be surprised how often we forget what that means.

We hear that John was sent to prepare the way of the Lord and that could lead us to believe that John was some sort of divinely ordained logistics guru. But that's not the sort of preparing John was sent to do. He was sent and ordained by God to preach a

no-nonsense, urgent message of repentance: *Repent! The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!* (Mt 3:2 ESV).

Unfortunately, this no-nonsense message didn't appeal to many people. It came across as harsh and politically-incorrect. John's message makes many of our modern day health and welfare preachers cringe. *You brood of vipers! Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire* (Mt 3:7,8,10 ESV).

Not exactly warm and fuzzy, is it? That kind of message, especially in our soft, 21st century culture, sounds mean. It hurts people's feelings. That message would get a big "dislike" on Facebook. Who would ever give their time or hard-earned money to a man or a congregation that preached such unloving, exclusive, divisive things?

*Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?* (Mal 3:2 ESV). People couldn't stand John the Baptist when he came with such a harsh, yet necessary message of repentance. In fact, he literally lost his head because some folks were so offended by him and his message. People are still offended by this eternal, unchanging message. People still can't stand the message and they still try to kill the messenger. But God does not change. Unfortunately, neither do His rebellious children of Adam.

*He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap* (Mal 3:2 ESV). Gold and silver don't come out of the ground pure and shiny like you see in a jewelry store. Those precious metals have to first be refined. They have to be burned at a very high temperature; high enough to burn away all the impurities and yet leave the precious metal behind. The more you burn them, the purer they get. Fuller's soap, which is lye, accomplishes the same thing in terms of laundry. It chemically burns away all the impurities. It leaves behind clean, pure linen.

That's what God was doing through the message of John the Baptist. That's what God was preparing His people for when He spoke through the prophets about the coming messenger and his message. John was proclaiming a purifying, refining message of repentance; a message that would rattle cages and offend.

The Holy Spirit was at work in John's message, confronting and putting to death the sins and impurities of sinners. Fire, the symbol of divine judgment and purification, was at work in the Word that John the Baptist proclaimed. John was the instrument that God used to burn and refine and purify His people, preparing them to be in the presence of Almighty God Himself – Jesus Christ.

*He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord* (Mal 3:3 ESV). If you don't know, the sons of Levi were priests. In the kingdom of Christ, which you are currently a member of, who are the priests? Everyone who believes in Christ and clings to Him in faith! It's what St. Peter called the *priesthood of all believers*.

What is the job of a priest? The primary job of a priest was to offer sacrifices to the Lord.

Jesus said: *It is finished!* The sacrifice is complete. As present day priests in the Kingdom of God, the sacrifice we now offer is the sacrifice of thanksgiving. What else is there? We're not saved by anything we do or by any sacrifice we make. We are redeemed because of Christ alone. The sacrifice of thanksgiving that we offer, with all that we say, think, do, and have, is a sacrifice born in the righteousness that is ours through Jesus.

The refining and purifying that our Lord still works on us is an ongoing process on this side of eternity. It's what we call *sanctification*. You are saved, totally and completely, because of God's declaration that you are righteous because of Christ alone.

However, we still wear sinful flesh, don't we? We still have impurities. We still sin. Through the working of His Word, God continues to refine us and purify us so that at the end, when He calls us home to heaven, we are presented by Christ to the Father in heaven as completely pure and refined, more precious than gold or silver.

This is the whole Law and Gospel message of preparation that John the Baptist was sent to proclaim. It is this preparatory message of repentance and faith that is still being proclaimed today by faithful pastors around the world.

The words of our Lord in Malachi still ring true today: *I the Lord do not change; therefore you are not consumed* (Mal 3:6 ESV). God is gracious, patient, merciful, and long-suffering. We are not consumed by His wrath, not because He approves of our sinfulness, but because He is patient with us in the midst of our sinfulness. He gives us the opportunity to repent and be saved. He desires the condemnation of no one. He desires that everyone believe and have eternal life. God has promised to never judge a man until the last bit of life has left his body. As long as you have air in your lungs, you have the opportunity to repent and cling to Christ alone in faith and be saved. This will never change.

*From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them* (Mal 3:7 ESV). Look around at the world we live in today. Look in the mirror. As much as things have changed in 2,500 years, sadly, they have remained the same. We're still rebellious sinners who think the other guy needs to repent. We still turn a blind eye and deaf ear to God and His message of repentance.

Our sanctified life is often anything but sanctified. We often live life like we're in charge and calling all the shots. We'll do this, that, and the other thing and we'll worry about repenting later. We'll do what we want, when we want, even if it is sinful, and we'll worry about going to church and seeking forgiveness later.

What if later never comes? The Lord said on more than one occasion that death comes like a thief in the night. In fact, He even referred to His own triumphant return in similar fashion: *Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come* (Mk 13:33 ESV).

We still need the redemption and salvation that comes only through faith in Christ.

That's the Good News I'm telling you. Today, your Lord and Savior does come to you. He comes to you, not in terrifying End-time judgment and wrath, but in eternal, unchanging grace, mercy, and peace. He comes to you today in order to feed you and nourish you with His Word, Body, and Blood.

We prepare ourselves, rather, God prepares us through His Word to receive these refining, purifying, justifying gifts of grace by first repenting. We did it at the beginning of this service. We confessed. We repented. We turned back to God, away from our sin, and we cried out to Him to be merciful to us because of what Christ Jesus has done for us in His all-redeeming death and resurrection.

And here's the great thing about this preparation: God absolves you! He lets you know in no uncertain terms that you are forgiven. We don't have to go about the rest of the day wondering if God heard us or forgave us. You are redeemed in the blood of Christ Jesus.

In a very real way, through Confession and Absolution, God is preparing you to receive Him who brings His life-giving Word and Sacrament. In this Word and Sacrament He prepares you to go back out into a world that still hates Him and rebels against Him and His statutes. Your Lord is preparing and equipping you to go out into the trenches of this fallen and sinful world to be His priests; His servants and prophets and proclaimers, sending you out to prepare and proclaim the past, present, and future advent of our King.

May this Good News that you are redeemed because of Christ alone continue to refine you and purify you, and may this blessed, eternal message of salvation be in your hearts and on your lips all your remaining days. Jesus said: *Surely I am coming soon.* [And we respond:] *Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!* (Re 22:20 ESV).