

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
December 6, 2009 – Second Sunday of Advent
Malachi 3: 1-10; Luke 3: 1-6
Consecration Sunday

Today's Scripture readings tell us that preparing for what is to come requires an honest look at ourselves and how things are now.

The Book of Malachi comes from the post-exilic period, when Judah was reduced to a minor administrative unit in the vast Persian Empire. The Temple had already been rebuilt, and ritual life was back into full swing. But there's something off about it all. As one biblical scholar describes the whole book of Malachi, which by the way is only 55 verses long – “the prophet is concerned with details of animal sacrifice, the payment of tithes, bored priests, unfaithful husbands, and complaining laity” (NIB). Archaeological evidence studied from this time period supports the sense we glean from Malachi of a small and relatively poor community, without solid economic resources or great hopes, a community that could well ask, ‘where is the God of justice?’” And in answer to that question, God tells the people that he will send a messenger, which is what the Hebrew word Malachi means --- but before anything else is done, there will be refinement and purification, and not of others, but of themselves. The refiner's fire makes metal malleable so that impurities might be skimmed off and the surface polished. Fullers' soap was used to clean wool of dirt and crud so that it might be softened and woven into cloth. The fire and the soap work to bring out the very best of the substance. The unprecious, so to speak, is removed in order to get to the precious, to what is best, to what is most valuable.

And what both Malachi and John the Baptist tell us, each in their own way, is that the coming of the Lord requires us to undergo a process of transformation. In Malachi it's called refining. John the Baptist calls it repentance. But the ideas are, I think, similar. Things are not all as they should or could be. We have gathered impurities along the way. We have developed some bad habits. We have strayed off course. We have become tarnished.

The good news in Malachi is that God sends a refining fire, not a destroying fire. Junk metal can't be turned into gold or silver. But tarnished or impure gold and silver can be purified. It's not that everything related to Temple life had to be destroyed or discarded. It just needed to be renewed, reformed, refined. The covenant with God was of course still valid, but their keeping of it had grown lax. They knew things weren't as they should be, but they weren't looking within themselves or at the own behavior. They were blaming others. And that's the message the prophet Malachi delivers. You want justice? You want to see evidence of God's power and God's presence among you? Then look honestly and clearly at yourselves. You are committing adultery. You are mistreating those who work for you. You are not taking care of the widows and the orphans. You are withholding your full tithes. These are the actions that have tarnished you. These are the impurities that need the refiner's fire and the Fullers' soap. When

these things are taken care of, then other things will get better, too. That is God's promise.

Through Malachi. And through John the Baptist. You want the Messiah? You want to be saved? Then repent. Turn away from disobedience. And turn back to God.

This is not a message that gives us goosebumps. It's not thrilling or spine-tingling. Malachi's and John the Baptist's words are not needle-pointed onto samplers or etched into jewelry. We don't hang a big "REPENT!" banner across the front of our church. We don't send out invitations to our neighbors to come and be burned by the refiner's fire or scrubbed clean by Fullers' soap. When we think of the stories of this Advent/Christmas season, I doubt Malachi or John the Baptist are our favorite characters.

But here we are on this Sunday hearing them --- and so that means we have to ask ourselves, do they have a message that applies to us? In our time? In our situations? In this place? Is the message of refining and repenting a message for our ears, for our hearts?

I have put this sermon at almost the very end of our worship service today for a reason. Because I wanted it to lead into our next act of worship, and I wanted that act of worship to be how we end the service. With making our financial commitments for 2010. As you prepare to complete your pledge card, ask yourself what would it mean for your offering to be pleasing to the Lord? In thinking about our life together as a congregation, and the decisions and actions we will be making in the new year, consider what it will really take for things to be the way we'd like them to be. Is it just up to someone else to make changes in how things are done? Is it just up to someone else to make things better. Is it that person's job? Or that person's responsibility? Is it only matter of getting that person to change, or to have that way of doing things be different to make everything else better – or is up to me, too? Are my offerings pleasing to the Lord? Am I taking care of the things I need to take care of? Am I living out my faith in God as obediently, as reverently, as responsibility as I know I can? What things in my life need refining?

As the ushers begin to distribute the pledge cards now, you are invited to spend some time in prayer and meditation on this important decision. After you have made your commitment, you may come forward and put the card in this basket. If you are visitor today, don't be uncomfortable. This commitment service is something we do as a congregation every year. You are invited to stay for the lunch after our worship. And if you are a member or regular attender and you do not wish to complete this card, you are not pressured to do so. Giving to God is our response to God. It cannot be coerced or enforced. I do hope, however, you will give this invitation your serious consideration.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, remember that you have already tasted the bread of mercy and the wine of forgiveness. Remember too that God chooses to refine us because we are worth refining. We are precious in God's sight. As God's dearly

beloved, make your commitment in gratitude and joy. Enter into this season of gift-giving by making your best gift first. Your gift to God – to be used by this church to do God's work, and to share the good news of God's love through our ministries of nurture, outreach, and witness. May our gifts be pleasing to God. And may God's love uphold and strengthen each of us. Amen.